

INFERNO!

TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE

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Issue 7

INFERNO!™

ISN'T IT STRANGE how time creeps up on you and smacks you over the back of the head with a sock full of marbles when you least expect it? You know, when it feels like you've only been in the pub for half an hour, and suddenly the bell rings last orders (and you realise you can't stand up). Or when there's months and months before you have to even think about your mum's birthday and then, wallop! you've missed it. Or when you've only just got on the train from London to Nottingham, read your book for a bit, decided to have a nice little snooze, and then bingo, the train is terminating in Glasgow Central and will all passengers kindly disembark. Or when... But I think you're getting my drift.

So, obviously, barely a month or so has passed since we first thought up the idea of putting together an anthology of action and adventure stories set in the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. Well okay, maybe two months at most, if I'm

feeling generous. And yet sitting on my shelves are SIX issues of *Inferno!* And Marco is feverishly putting the finishing touches to this new one as I write this editorial – and very good it looks too, best one yet in fact (as I say about every issue). But issue 7? That means it's been... hold on! A year?! How can this be? Are those lumps the result of marble-bruising on the back of my head? How time flies!

Ha! On the other hand, what does time matter? Another two months, another issue, is what I say. Onwards and upwards, hunting for ever-better stories and features from the hugely talented *Inferno!* crew, our focus set firmly on the far horizon. And the worrying thing is we'll probably get there before we've even set off. Mmm... Before we know it, we'll be up to issue 1000 and I'll, well... I'll have been dead and gone for quite some – Mmm, perhaps we'll leave that one there for now.

Anyway, what I *really* wanted to say was a big 'Thank You' to everyone who has contributed to *Inferno!* over the past year, and an even bigger 'Thank You' to everyone who has shelled out hard cash to buy our humble publication. Hold on a minute, did I say Humble? HUMBLE?! What am I talking about? *Inferno!* is ace! I know it, you know it, we ALL know it. And with your continued support, how can we fail?

Well, I'd better stop there, that must be just about enough from me for one issue. Besides, the party is in full swing and the robed acolytes of the Black Library are waiting for me to fire up the pipe organ for a game of Musical Prayers.

*Happy birthday to us,
Happy birthday to us,
Dakka dakka! Dakka dakka!
Happy birthday to us!*

Andy Jones
Editor



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A Company of Wolves

by Dan Abnett

IT WAS, TO NO one's great surprise, raining in Middenheim that day. Spring rain, fresh as ice needles, spattered down on the vast old city sat brooding atop its granite crag, gazing down across the dismal forests around it. The city, and everyone in it, was cold and wet and miserable to the bone.

In a puddle-strewn yard behind the Spread Eagle tavern, Morgenstern carefully adjusted a line of plump turnips he had arranged along the flagstones, each one sat upon an upturned bucket. Then he walked to the end of the yard, belched delicately with a hand to his mouth and little finger cocked, spat on his meaty palms and hefted up the great warhammer that had been leaning against the slimy bricks.

He began to spin it, crossing his grip deftly, looping the mighty head back and forth in a figure of eight around his shoulders. *Whooff! Whooff! Whooff!* it hummed as it circled. But Morgenstern was stood a little too close to the back wall and, after another circuit, the hammerhead struck against the stonework. Several bricks shattered and dropped out, and the warhammer bounced to the ground.

Morgenstern swore colourfully and wavered unsteadily as he stooped to retrieve his weapon, rainwater dripping from his vast shaggy beard. Then he wobbled some more as he stooped to retrieve his tankard. He straightened up and supped from it. Then he tried unsuccessfully to replace the shards of brick, fussing as if no one would notice the dent if he smoothed it over. Several more bricks fell out. Giving up, Morgenstern turned back to his row of buckets and started to spin the hammer again, this time checking he had room to swing.

'Is this going to take much longer?' Aric asked from the tavern doorway. He stood leaning against the doorjamb; a tall,

powerfully-built young man not yet twenty-two, with a mane of black hair and bright blue eyes. He wore both the red plate armour and the grey pelt of the White Wolf Templars well.

'Hush!' the older knight said, concentrating on his swing and not looking round. Morgenstern adjusted the fall of his own wolf-pelt so it did not constrict the movement of his red-armoured limbs. 'Behold, my young friend, how a master of the warhammer displays his skill. Observe! Before me, the heads of my foes!'

'Turnips?'

'Quite so. That is indeed what they represent.'

'These foes are what? Lying down? Buried up to the neck?'

Morgenstern smiled patiently. 'They are large and able-bodied warriors, Aric. I, however, am on a horse.'

'Ah.'

'For the purposes of this demonstration, imagine I am on a horse.' Still spinning the hammer, Morgenstern began to prance back and forth on the spot. He made clip-clop noises with his tongue and occasionally admonished, 'Steady there! Whoa, girl!'

Aric closed his eyes.

'Yeee-hah!' Morgenstern barked suddenly and lurched forward, head back, as his imaginary horse bolted. His great, thundering, armoured mass, with the hammer swooping about him in a vast circle, drummed down the yard, spraying up water and dislodging flagstones as he charged the buckets. His initial swing smashed the turnip on the first bucket, then, without breaking stride, he galloped in and out of the remaining buckets, decapitating each turnip in turn, slaloming between the rows, swooping and crossing the hammer with astonishing precision.

By then Aric had reopened his eyes. For all the pantomime idiocy, for all the drunkenness, for all the fact that Morgenstern was at the wrong end of his fifties and two hundred pounds too heavy, Aric was still impressed by the big man's weapon skill.

With a bellowing flourish, Morgenstern elegantly took out the last of his foes, bucket and all, crushing both with a blow that lofted them over the gable end.

Then his boot slipped on the sheened cobbles, he stumbled at full pelt and went head-first into the stables... through a door he hadn't opened first.

Aric winced and went back inside. It was going to be a long day.



INSIDE THE Spread Eagle, he rejoined Anspach, Gruber and Von Glick at the small table in the corner.

'Did he do it?' Gruber asked.

Aric nodded sadly. 'All of them.'

Anspach chuckled his dirty, melodic chuckle. He was a handsome man in his late thirties, with devilish eyes and a smile that could charm chastity belts into spontaneous release. 'That's six shillings from each of you, I fancy.'

'By the Wolf, Anspach!' Von Glick grunted. 'Is there nothing you won't wager on?'

Anspach accepted his winnings. 'Actually, no. In fact, that reminds me, I have a bag of gold riding on a certain goathead going the distance at the Bernabau this afternoon.'

Von Glick shook his head in dismay. A veteran Wolf of the old school, Von Glick was a slender, angular man of sixty years. His grizzled hair was long and straggly, and his chin was shaven to pepper stubble. He was stiff and disapproving about all things. Aric wondered if there was anything Von Glick couldn't complain about. He somehow doubted the prim old man had ever had the passion to be a noble warrior.

'So where's Morgenstern now?' Gruber asked, toying with his tankard.

'Having a lie down,' Aric said. 'You know, I think... he drinks too much.'

The other three snorted.

'Brother Templar,' Anspach said, 'you're too recent an addition to this noble order to

have witnessed it, but our Morgenstern is famous for the prodigious scale of his imbibing! Some of his greatest victories on the field of combat – like those Orc-scum he took at the Battle of Kern's Gate – such feats have been fired by Ulric, and fuelled by ale!'

'Maybe,' Aric said doubtfully, 'but I think it's getting to him. His reflexes. His co-ordination...'

'He killed the turnips, didn't he?' Von Glick asked.

'And the stable door,' Aric said darkly.

They fell silent for a while.

'Still, our Morgenstern,' Anspach began. 'I'll wager he could–'

'Oh, shut up!' growled Von Glick.

Aric sat back and gazed around the smoky tavern. He could see Ganz, their new, young company commander, sat in a side booth, with the hot-blooded Vandam talking eagerly at him.

'What's that about?' he asked Gruber. The white-haired Gruber was deep in thought and snapped up with a start as Aric addressed him. He looked almost scared just then, Aric thought. That's not the first time I've caught him lost in thoughts he doesn't like. Gruber was the most respected of the Company's men, a veteran like Morgenstern and Von Glick, who had served with old Jurgen from the beginning. His hair was thin, his eyes pale, his papery skin almost translucent with age, but Aric knew there was a power, a terrible force inside that warrior.

Except now... now, for the first time since he joined the Company eighteen months before, Aric sensed that Gruber's power was waning. Was it age? Was it... Jurgen? Or something else?

Aric gestured again over at Vandam and Ganz. 'What's Vandam bending our commander's ear about?'

'I hear Vandam wants to transfer,' Von Glick said quietly. 'He's a glory hound. He wants promotion. Word is, he sees our company as a dead end. He wants to move to another mob.'

The four of them grunted their disapproval and all took a drink.

'Don't think Ganz will let him. Ganz has barely had time to make his mark in command since the... since that business. He won't want to lose a man before he's had a chance to prove something.' Gruber looked thoughtful. 'If they ever let us prove anything again.'

'It's not long till Mitterfruhl,' Anspach said. 'Then the campaign season really starts. We'll get something... a good run into the Drakwald. I bet you.'

Aric was silent. Something had to happen soon, or this particular brave company of White Wolves was going to lose its heart entirely.



THE GREAT TEMPLE of Ulric was almost empty. The air was still and cold, and smelled of candle smoke. Ganz reverently placed his gloves and warhammer in the reliquary in the entrance hall.

The acoustics in the vast, vaulted chamber were superb, and Ganz could hear the precise intonations of four Knights Panther who were whispering prayers on the other side of the High Altar, kneeling, heads down. He could also hear the faint squeak of lint as a Temple adept polished the brass finials of the lectern. The great statue of Ulric himself towered like a thundercloud to block the light from the high windows.

Ganz bowed his head and made his observance, then crossed the chamber and knelt before the Sacred Flame. He was still kneeling there when he felt the hand on his shoulder. Ganz looked up into the face of the Grandmaster, his craggy, bearded features outlined in the flame light.

'We should talk, Ganz. I'm glad you came by. Walk with me to the Regimental Chapel.'

Ganz got up and fell into step beside the old warrior. He saw that the four Knights Panther were leaving, casting curious glances in his direction.

'I came to seek... guidance, Grandmaster,' Ganz began. 'This season will be my first as a commander of men, and already I...'

'Do you lack confidence, Ganz?'

'No, lord. But I do lack experience. And the men are... listless.'

They walked down a short flight of steps and entered the smaller, warmer interior of the Templar's Regimental Chapel, decorated with standards and banners and the honour role of memorial slabs. Both men bowed briefly to the great wolfskin pelt stretched out on the wall.

The Grandmaster turned to Ganz. 'Your company is more than listless, Ganz. It is

weak. It has lost its way. This whole winter they've idled here in the city, wasting their health and money and time. Several have become noted drunkards. Especially Morgenstern.'

'It is easy to exaggerate—'

'He relieved himself in the font in the Temple,' the Grandmaster said with great and sad certainty. 'During High Mass.'

Ganz sighed.

The Grandmaster nodded. 'Morgenstern is a disgrace. And Anspach. You know about his gambling? He owes a large amount to the stadium brokers. And I have had audiences with that hotblood Vandam twice now to hear him petition me for a transfer.'

Ganz hung his head.

'There are others with problems too, each to his own. I don't pretend your job is easy, Ganz — taking command of a demoralised mob like this. And I know everything stems from that one incident last summer in the Drakwald. That beastpack got the better of you. They were strong. Sometimes, Ulric save us, the evil ones do win. It was a tragedy you lost so many good men. And to loose Jurgen. It can't be easy for you take his place.'

'What can I do, Grandmaster? I don't command the respect Jurgen did. How can I rally the Company?'

The Grandmaster crossed to the far wall, and to Ganz's great surprise lifted down the standard of Vess. It was old and tattered, stained with ancient, noble blood. It was one of the most revered battle standards in the regiment, carried at some of the Templars' greatest victories.

'You will take your company out, into the forests, beneath this old and venerable standard, and you will destroy the beastpack that broke your honour.'

Ganz took the shaft of the standard with amazement. He looked up, and met the steely gaze of his old commander, Jurgen, the newest of the graven memorials on the wall. For a long while, Ganz stared into that marble face, remembering the long white beard, the hawkish look, the famous studded eye-patch. Ganz knew the Grandmaster was right. It was the only way.



IT WAS A COLD DAWN and raining once again. The fourteen brothers of the company assembled in the stable block behind the Temple, adjusting the harnesses of their steeds, grumbling in low voices, their breath steaming the air.

'A raiding party? Before Mitterfruhl?' Morgenstern complained, swigging from a flask in his saddlebags as he pretended to check them.

'A drink? Before breakfast?' Von Glick sneered quietly.

Morgenstern laughed, booming and hard, but Aric knew it was sham good-humour. He could see the strain in Morgenstern's pallid face, see the way his great hands shook.

Aric looked about. Vandam was resplendent, his face flushed with determination. His wolf pelt hung just so across the shoulders of his red plate armour. Gruber looked far away, distant and preoccupied as he fumbled with the harness straps of his stamping steed.

Anspach laughed and joked with his fellows. Von Glick scowled at him. Ganz looked grim and quiet. The others began to mount up, exchanging jokes and slurs – Kriever, Einholt, Schiffer, Bruckner, Kaspen, Schell, Dorff.

'Aric!' Ganz called, and Aric crossed the yard. As the youngest of the company, it was his privilege to carry the standard. He was amazed when Ganz placed the precious Standard of Vess into his mailed hand.

Everyone in the yard fell silent.

'By the decree of the Grandmaster himself, we ride under the banner of Vess, and we ride for revenge,' Ganz said simply and swung into the saddle.

He turned his steed about and the company fell into step behind him, riding out of the yard into the streets and the rain beyond.



THEY CAME DOWN the western viaduct out of the city, into the damp woodlands, and followed the forest road for six hours before stopping to water their horses and eat at a village on the track. In the afternoon, the sun came up, glinting off their red plate mail. The heat drew mist out of the wet trees and they rode as if through smoke. In each village they passed,

the locals came out to see the brave and feared band of Templars who sang a low battle hymn as they rode along.

They slept the night in a village longhall above a waterfall, then rode at dawn into the darker paths, the long tracks of black mud that ran down into the oily darkness of the Drakwald Forest, that lay across the land like the fallen cloak of some black-hearted god.



IT WAS NOON, but a pale, weak noon, and chill rain pattered down through the naked branches of black elms and twisted maple. The ground beneath them was coated in a stinking, matted black slime of dead leaves that had fallen the autumn before and now lay rotting back into the dark soil. Spring would be a long time coming here. There seemed little sign of life save for the fourteen riders themselves. Occasionally a woodpecker would hammer in the distance, or some other bird would whoop. Aric saw cobwebs in low branches hung with rainwater like diamond chokers.

'Smoke!' Von Glick called suddenly, and they reined up, sniffing the air.

'He's right!' Vandam said eagerly, sliding the long haft of his warhammer out of his saddle loop.

Ganz held up a hand. 'Steady, Vandam! If we move, we move as a company or not at all. Aric, raise the standard.'

Aric edged alongside the leader and pulled the old banner upright.

With a nod, Ganz led off and the column moved two abreast through the trees in the direction of the smoke, the hooves splashing through the leaf slush and rot.

The clearing was wide and open: trees had been felled for it and now the wood was being burnt on a stone slab set before a crude statue. Five shambling, hairy forms were worshipping at the fire.

'By Ulric! Wolves! Ride!' Ganz yelled and they broke into a gallop, tearing down the slope onto the clearing itself, exploding water from the marshy ground with their hooves.

The beastmen at the shrine looked around in horror, baying and breaking for cover.

At the back of the file, Morgenstern turned from the charge and looked to Gruber, who had reached a dead stop. 'What's the

matter?' he bellowed. 'We're missing the fun!'

'I think my steed has thrown a shoe,' Gruber growled. 'Go on, you old fool! Ride on!'

Morgenstern turned again after the main charge and took a deep pull from his saddle bottle. Then with a huge cry he charged down the slope after the main party. The low branch took him clean out of the saddle.

The rest thundered out across the clearing, Aric bellowing as he held the banner high. Three of the beastmen broke and fled; the remaining two snatched up pikes and turned to face the charge, shrieking in deep, inhuman voices.

Vandam was, by now, leading the charge. His swinging mallet destroyed the skull of one of the defenders, smacking the goat-headed aberration back into the ground.

Ganz, just behind him, overshot the other and tried to wheel around. His horse lost its footing on the wet leaves and slid over, spilling him off. The beast turned to strike but in a moment Aric and Kriber had run it down between their horses, smashing it to the ground. Anspach galloped past the shrine after one of the escapees, whirling his hammer. Von Glick was close behind.

'Ten shillings says I make this kill!' Anspach laughed.

Von Glick cursed and tried to pull level, but Anspach hurled his hammer and it went spinning off after the fleeing creature. It decapitated a sapling and missed the beast by ten paces. Anspach swore and reined in his charge.

'Gods help you that you ever win a wager!' Von Glick yelled behind him as he caught up with the beast at the tree line. He swung two blows which both missed, but the creature doubled back and was driven into the aim of Dorff, who crushed its skull.

The other two fled into the trees. Vandam, without breaking stride, galloped after them.

'Back! Vandam! Back here!' Ganz bellowed as he grabbed the reins of his shaken horse.

Vandam paid no attention. They could hear his whoops echoing into the forest.

'Schell! Von Glick! Go and round that idiot up!' Ganz ordered and the two riders obeyed. Everyone else had galloped to a standstill around the shrine. Ganz looked back and saw that Gruber had dismounted at the edge of the clearing and was helping to prop Morgenstern against a tree. Morgenstern's horse was trotting around, its

reins trailing. Ganz shook his head and spat an oath. He strode up to the shrine and gazed for a moment at the crude statue. Then he swung his hammer and smashed it into splinters.

Ganz turned back and looked at his men. 'Now they know we're here. Now they will come looking for us and our job will be easier!'



'VANDAM? WHERE are you, you idiot?' Von Glick bawled as he rode slowly through the dark glades beyond the clearing. Dark pools stood stagnant between the filthy trees and brackish water trickled down the slate outcrops. Through the trees and the mist, Von Glick could make out Schell, riding a parallel course, yelling out, 'Vandam! Come around back or we'll leave you out here!'

Von Glick heard movement in the undergrowth nearby and raised his hammer. Vandam rode out of the trees.

'Trust you to come looking for me, Von Glick!' he snorted. 'You mother-hen the whole company! You're so stiff you wouldn't know valour if it came knocking.'

Von Glick shook his head wearily. He knew too well his own reputation with the younger members of the company: stiff, inflexible, an old bore who nagged and complained. Jurgen had once told him he was the backbone of the company, but Von Glick had a suspicion the commander had been trying to make light of Von Glick's attitudes. Von Glick hated himself for it, but he couldn't help himself. There was no discipline these days, the young Templars were reckless fools, and Vandam the worst of them!

'Ganz ordered me to find you,' Von Glick said sharply, trying to hold his anger. 'What sense is it to ride off alone like that? There's no glory in it?'

'Isn't there now?' smirked Vandam. 'I ran one to ground, broke his back. The other slipped away.'

That was the worst of it: Vandam's arrogance was matched only by his skill as a warrior. Damn his eyes! thought Von Glick. 'We'll ride back. Now!' he instructed Vandam, who shrugged mildly and turned his horse around. 'Schell!' Von Glick called. 'I found him! Schell!' Von Glick could still

make out the other rider, but the mist and trees were deadening his voice. 'Go on,' Von Glick told Vandam. 'I'll fetch him.' He spurred up along the edge of a mere in the direction of Schell who saw him at last and began to ride over. Von Glick turned his horse back.

The beastman came out of the bushes with a feral scream. Driven, hounded by Vandam, it had hidden, but Von Glick had passed close by its hiding place and panic had galvanised it into fierce action. The iron barb of the spear took the old Wolf through the right hip. He bellowed in pain and the horse reared. The beastman clung on, shaking his weapon, which was wedged fast by bone and armour. Von Glick screamed, hooked like a fish, pushed so far back in the saddle by the spear that he couldn't reach his warhammer.

Schell bellowed in dismay and galloped in.

Vandam, hearing the commotion, turned and looked in horror.

'Ulric's bloody fists!' he gasped. 'Oh, gods, no!'

The spear broke. Freed, Von Glick fell from the saddle and landed in the shallows of the mere. The beastman lunged forward.

Schell's horse leapt the mere at the narrowest point and the warrior swung the hammer spike down on the creature, killing it instantly.

Schell leaped off his horse and ran to Von Glick, who lay on his side in the pool, his face pale with pain. It looked like his red armour was leaking into the black water.

Vandam raced up.

Schell looked up at him with fierce, angry eyes. 'He's alive,' he hissed.



GANZ STRODE across the shrine clearing to where Morgenstern was picking himself up. 'Let's talk,' he said. 'Away from the others. I'm sure you don't want them hearing what I'm going to say to you.'

Morgenstern, who had twenty years' more service to the Temple than Ganz, looked sour, but he did not disobey. They moved away across the clearing, talking low.

Aric joined Gruber, who sat to one side on a fallen log. 'You alright?' he asked.

'My horse was wrong-footed. Threw a shoe, I thought.'

'Looks fine to me,' Aric said.

Gruber looked up at the young man, his lean, lined face hard but not angry. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

Aric shrugged. With his long dark hair and trimmed black goatee, he reminded Gruber of the young Jurgen himself. 'Whatever you want it to mean,' he said.

Gruber steeped his hands and thought for a moment. Aric had something, a quality. One day he would be a leader, a lot more effortlessly than poor Ganz, who tried so hard and was liked so little. Aric had natural command. He would be a great warrior for the Temple in time.

'I...' Gruber began, 'I seem to lack the fire I once had. At Jurgen's side, courage was easy...'

Aric sat next to him. 'You're the most respected man in the troop, Gruber. Everyone acknowledges that, even bluff old warhorses like Morgenstern and Von Glick. You were Jurgen's right hand man. You know, after Jurgen's death, I'll never understand why you didn't take the command when it was offered you. Why did you hand it on to Ganz?'

'Ganz is good man: solid, unimaginative, but a good man. He'd paid his dues. I'm just a veteran. I'd be a poor commander.'

'I don't think so,' Aric said shaking his head.

Gruber sighed. 'What if I said it was because Jurgen was dead? How could I take the place of that man, my sworn commander, my friend? The man I failed?'

'Failed?' Aric said in surprise.

'That dreadful day last summer, when the beast pack fell on us out of nowhere. We stood together as a company or we fell, each man watching the others back.'

'It was hell, all right.'

'I was right by Jurgen, fighting at his right hand. I saw the bull-man swing in with the axe. I could have blocked it, taken the blow myself, but I froze.'

'You weren't to blame!'

'I was! I hesitated and Jurgen died. If it hadn't been for me, he'd be here today.'

'No,' Aric said firmly. 'It was bad luck and Ulric called him to his hall.'

Gruber looked into the younger man's face. 'My nerve's gone, Aric. I can't tell the others - I certainly can't tell Ganz - but as we rode in to the charge, I felt my courage melt. What if I freeze again? What if it's Ganz who pays the price this time? You? I'm a coward and no use to this company!'

'You are no such thing,' Aric said. He tried to compose an argument to snap the veteran out of his grim humour, but they were interrupted by shouting.

Morgenstern strode back into the clearing, bellowing, a stern-faced Ganz in his wake. The big ox reached his horse, pulled three bottles from his saddle bags and hurled them at a nearby tree, smashing them one by one.

'Satisfied?' he bawled at Ganz.

'Not yet,' Ganz snarled back.

'Ganz! Ganz!' The shout echoed round the clearing. Schell led Von Glick's horse back to them, the old warrior slumped in the saddle with Vandam riding alongside him to support him.

'Oh great god of the Wolf!' Gruber cried, leaping to his feet.

'Von Glick!' Morgenstern cried as he pushed past the dismayed Ganz.

They lowered the wounded man down and the company stood around as Kaspen, who had studied with a surgeon and an apothecary, treated the ugly wound.

'He needs a proper surgeon,' the thick-set man said, wiping blood from his hands. 'Wound's deep and filthy, and he's lost blood.'

Ganz looked up at the sky. Evening was slipping down on them. 'We'll return to Middenheim tomorrow. First light. The fastest will ride ahead to fetch a surgeon and a cart. We—'

'We will not,' Von Glick said, his voice thin and bitter. 'We will not go back on my account. This mission, this undertaking, is a holy cause to refound the strength of this company and avenge our fallen leader. We will not abandon that task! I will not let you abandon this!'

'But—' Ganz began.

Von Glick pulled himself up to a sitting position, wincing. 'Promise me, Ganz! Promise me we'll go on!'

Ganz faltered. He did not know what to say. He wheeled on Vandam, who stood to one side. 'You bloody fool! This is your fault! If you hadn't been so impetuous, you'd never have led Von Glick into that!'

'I—'

'Silence! The company stands together or it falls! You betrayed the very foundation of this brotherhood!'

'He's not to blame,' Von Glick said. His eyes were glittering with strength born out of pain. 'Oh, he shouldn't have broken from the pack and ridden off alone, but I did this

to myself. I should have been wary, I should have been looking. I dropped my guard, like any old fool, and paid the price.'

Silence. Ganz looked from one man to another. Most looked uncomfortable, awkward, disconcerted. The company spirit had never seemed so deflated, not even after Jurgen's death. At least then there had been anger. Now there was just disillusion, a loss of faith and comradeship.

'We'll make camp here,' Ganz said finally. 'With luck, the beasts will come for us tonight and we can finish this.'



DAWN CAME, COLD and pale. The last shift of watchmen – Schell, Aric and Bruckner – roused the others. Morgenstern poked the fire into life and Kaspen treated Von Glick's wound. The old warrior was as pale and cold as the morning, shivering with pain.

'Don't tell Ganz how bad I am!' he hissed to Kaspen. 'On your life, swear it!'

Anspach was going to water the horses when he found Kriever. At some time in the night, a black-fletched arrow had skewered his neck where he lay sleeping. The Templar was dead.

They stood around in silent mourning, even more sombre than before. Ganz boiled with anger. He strode away from the group.

At the tree line, Gruber joined him. 'It is bad luck, Ganz. Bad luck on us, bad luck on Kriever. We didn't deserve it, and he deserved a better end than this.'

Ganz wheeled round. 'What do I have to do, Gruber? For Ulric's sake! How can I lead this company to glory if we don't get a chance? I destroyed their shrine to bring them to us, to make them angry and drive them into a frontal attack. A pitched battle where we would shine! But no! They come back all right, and with typical beast cunning, they harry us and kill us as we sleep!'

'So we change our tactics,' Gruber said.

Ganz shrugged. 'I don't know how! I don't know what to suggest! I keep thinking about Jurgen, and how he kept command... I keep trying to think the way he did, to remember all the tricks and inspiration... and I can't remember a thing! All those great victories

we shared, and I can't recall the plan behind a single one of them!

'Calm down and think, Ganz,' Gruber sighed. 'What about Kern's Gate? The winning stroke there was to swing around behind the Orcs.'

'Exactly!' said Ganz, excited, 'and that was Morgenstern's idea, wasn't it? Not Jurgen's! The same with siege at Aldobard... that was Von Glick who suggested a two-pronged attack.'

'Yes,' Gruber said. 'Jurgen was a good leader all right. He knew a good idea when he heard it. He knew to listen to his men. The company is strength, Ganz. We stand together or we fall. And if one of us has a good plan, a good leader knows not to be too proud to adopt it.'



'SO?' SAID GANZ, trying to sound lighter than he felt. 'Any ideas?' The company coughed and shuffled, nobody looking at anyone else.

'I bet I know-' began Anspach.

There was a general groan.

'Let's hear him out,' said Ganz.

'Well, myself, I like a wager,' said Anspach as if this was news, getting up to address them. 'So do many folk... the chance to win something, something important and valuable, something more than you normally get a chance at. These beastmen are no different. They want revenge for the smashed shrine, but not so much they're going to or risk their stinking hides in a frontal assault. They'd rather live.'

'But if we tempted them with something more... something they might feel was worth risking their necks for. We could lure them out. That's my plan, a tempting wager for them. And I'll bet it works.'

There was some nodding, a few sneers. Morgenstern turned a belch into an approving chuckle.

Ganz smiled. For the first time there seemed to be a sense of union, of all the minds working as one.

'But what do we offer them?' asked Kaspen.

Anspach shrugged. 'I'm working on that... we carry gold and silver, between us probably quite a lot. Maybe a pot of coins?'

Vandam laughed. 'You think they'd care? The beasts don't value gold much.'

'Well, what else have we got?' asked Schell.

'We have this,' Aric said and lifted the standard of Vess.

'You're mad!' cried Einholt.

'Think of the prestige, the glory, they would achieve in the beast nations to capture this. Think of the victory it would represent...'

'Think of the disgrace if we lose the bloody thing!' cried Vandam.

'We won't,' Aric said. 'That's the point. It's precious enough to lure them out en masse...'

'And precious enough to make damn sure we fight to the last to keep it,' Von Glick finished for him. 'A good plan.'

Ganz nodded.

'So,' Dorff asked, 'do we just leave it out in the open for them?'

'Too obvious,' Ganz said.

'And I will not leave it,' Aric said flatly. 'It is my duty. I cannot abandon the standard, nor will I.'

Ganz paced the circle of men. 'Aric stays with the standard. The rest of us lie in cover ready to strike.'

'Aric can't stand alone...' Gruber began.

'It'd still look too obvious,' Anspach added. 'Some one has to stay with him.'

'I'll do it,' Vandam said. There was ferocity in his eyes. Ganz knew the young warrior was eager to make amends for his earlier rashness.

He was about to nod when Von Glick spoke up. 'A brave offer, Vandam. But you're too good in the charge to waste. Let me stay, Ganz. We'll stay with Kriever's corpse and it'll look like the standard bearer has been left to watch the dead and the dying.'

'That would be more convincing,' Anspach said.

'I'll stay too,' Gruber said. 'They'd expect at least two men. And my horse has thrown a shoe.'

Ganz looked round at them all. 'Agreed! Let's do it! For the glory of Ulric and the memory of Jurgen!'

The ten riders mounted up and thundered off across the clearing to disappear into the dark woods. Ganz paused before he rode. 'May the wolf run beside you,' he said to Aric, Gruber and Von Glick.

Aric and Gruber made Von Glick comfortable by the shrine, covered Kriever

with a saddle cloth, tied the horses off to the west, and lit a fire.

Aric planted the standard in the clay soil. 'You needn't have stayed too,' he told Gruber.

'Yes, I did,' Gruber said simply. 'I need to do this very much.'



EVENING SLOPED down on them, speckling the heavy sky with dark twists of cloud. Rain lanced down, slantwise, and a wind picked up, lifting the ragged hem of the ancient standard and swishing through the miserable forest.

The four remained by the fire - the two living warriors, the dead man and the man half way between their states.

Von Glick's eyes were clouded as dark as the heavens. 'Ulric,' he murmured, gazing up at the cold sky. 'Let them come.'

Gruber reached out and pulled at Aric's arm. Stiff cold, the two men lifted their warhammers and rose, standing by the guttering ashes of the fire, looking across the clearing.

'By the sacred flame, Aric my brother...' Gruber said. 'Now we'll see a fight.'

The beastmen attacked.

There were perhaps three score of them, more than Aric remembered from the pitched battle the previous season when the beastmen had caught them by surprise and Jurgen fell. The misshapen monsters were clad in reeking pelts, their animalistic heads crowned by all manner of horns and tusks and antlers, their skins scaled and haired and furred, bald and muscular, diseased and slack. They bellowed as they charged in from the eastern treeline; their foul collective breath gusted before them, eyes wild like insane cattle, wet, drooling mouths agape showing ulcerated gums, black teeth and hooked fangs. The ground shook.

Aric and Gruber leapt onto their horses, and galloped around to stand between the charge and the lonely standard.

'For Ulric!' Aric yelled, his warhammer beginning its swing.

'By the hammers of the Wolf!' Gruber raged, holding his horse steady.

'For the Temple! For the Temple!' came a third voice. The riders glanced back.

Hammer in hand, Von Glick stood beside the standard, supporting his weight against the haft. 'For the Temple!' he screamed at them again.

Their battle roars as feral as the beast, Aric and Gruber leapt their horses into the front of the pack as it came to them, giving themselves momentum and meeting the charge head on. The hammers swung and flew. Blood and spittle sprayed from cracked skulls. The hooves of the war horses tore into flaccid flesh. Spears and blades thrust at them. The war cry of the two wolves echoed above all. Aric rejoiced. He had almost forgotten the ecstasy of combat, of the raging melee. Alongside him, Gruber laughed out loud.

Von Glick stood his ground by the standard, despite the blood that leaked down his armour from the broken wound, and slew the first beast that charged him. The second fell, its skull cloven. The third rocked back, its ribs cracked.

Now there were three, four around him, five. He was as deep in the fight as Aric and Gruber.

Aric struck left and right, blood painting across his red armour, foam flecking back from the frenzied mouth of his steed. He saw Gruber laughing, striking.

Falling.

A lance thrust took down his mount. Gruber fell amongst the howling beast, his hammer swinging in furious denial of the end.

They heard the thunder. Above, in the sky as the storm broke. Below, on the ground, as the Company of Wolves charged in behind the beastpack. Inside, in their hearts, as Ulric bayed the name of Jurgen.



THE KNIGHTS of the White Wolf charged in line abreast, with Ganz at the centre, flanked by Vandam and Anspach.

'God's teeth, but I need a drink!' Morgenstern shouted as they swept in.

'No, you don't! You need this kind of courage instead!' Ganz rallied.

They hit the beastpack as it turned in confusion to meet them, ploughing over ranks of the fierce creatures, toppling and

trampling, warhammers raining down as furiously as the downpour from above. Lightning flashed on the grotesque mayhem. The baying creatures turned from their original targets and swept into the fight with the cavalry force.

Aric rode forward across the corpse-strewn ground and helped Gruber to his feet. The older warrior was speckled with blood, but alive.

'See to Von Glick and watch the standard. Give me your horse,' Gruber said to Aric.

Aric dismounted and returned to the banner of Vess as Gruber galloped into the brutal fray.

Von Glick lay by the standard, which was still stuck upright in the earth. The bodies of almost a dozen beastmen lay around him.

'L-let me see...' Von Glick breathed. Aric knelt beside him, and raised his head. 'So, Anspach's bold plan worked...' breathed the veteran warrior. 'He's pleased... I'll wager.'

Aric started to laugh but stopped. The old man was gone.



IN THE THICK of the combat, Morgenstern wielded his warhammer and drove his horse through the press of bodies, swinging left and right, destroying the enemy as easily as if they had been a row of turnips on upturned pails. He laughed his raucous laugh, and set about himself. Nearby, Anspach saw his display and joined the laughter, smashing down with his own hammer.

At the heart of the fight, Vandam, the fiercest of all, glory singing in his veins, destroyed beast after beast, three times the number of any of them. He was still slaughtering the monsters as their spears cut him down.

In the tumult, Ganz saw the great bull-man, the pack leader, the beast that had slain Jurgen. He charged forward, but his hammer was dragged down by the weight of creatures on him. The bull-man swung to strike at him.

The haft of Gruber's hammer blocked the axe. Gruber, yelling the war cry, rode in on his commander's right hand, guarding his flank.

Ganz pulled his weapon clear and, before the massive bull-head could swing again, drove its snout back into its skull in an explosion of blood.

'In the name of Ulric!' Ganz screamed rejoicing. The heavens thundered their applause.



SMOKE ROSE FROM the storm-swept field, smoke and the steam from the blood. The Wolf Templars dismounted one by one amid the carnage and offered thanks to the raging sky. Of the beastman horde, not one had survived.

Ganz walked quietly to view the fallen. Von Glick; at Aric's feet. Ganz was sure Aric guarded the old man's body more than he did the fluttering banner. Vandam; skewered four times with crude lances, twisted at the top of a mound of dead.

'He has found his glory,' Morgenstern said solemnly. 'He's transferred to that better company. Ulric's own.'

'May the wolves guard his brave soul,' said Ganz.

Across the bloody, torn-up field, Anspach started to sing a battle hymn, soft and low. It was a mourning song, of victory and loss, one of old Jurgen's favourites. Within three bars of it, ten other voices had joined the song.



THEY RODE BACK into Middenheim three days later. It was raining then too. The festival of Mitterfruhl was almost on them all, but the Grandmaster came away from the preparations at the Temple, drawn by the excited murmurings. He and his entourage were waiting for them in the Temple Square as they rode in, eleven riders, proud behind the fluttering banner of Vess, three noble dead lashed to their steeds.

Ganz, tall on his horse, gazed down at the Grandmaster and saluted.

'The company has returned to the Temple, my lord,' he said, 'and the heart has returned to the company.' ●

ADEPTUS ASTROGRAPHY

>> SYSTEM DATA <<
>> DOWNLOAD <<
>> TRANSMITTING <<
>> RECEIVED <<

Name: SCT-004

[SO3.34M.Cor]

Cluster: Cornellian

Location: Segmentum
Obscurus

Attitude: VH34/HS566

Distance from Terra:

17,456 k-l

Primary type: Singular

>> INTERRUPT <<
>> PLANETARY DATA <<
>> DOWNLOAD <<
>> TRANSMITTING <<
>> RECEIVED <<

Planet: Salamander V

Mean orbital distance:

152,456,003 km

Mass: 1.23

Orbit: 0.5

Rotation: 1.18

Equatorial diameter:

12,094 km

Gravity: 0.96

Satellites: 1

ICONS OF THE IMPERIUM



THE DOOMSDAY CANNON

The massive weapon installation that lies toward the northern pole of the fifth planet in the Salamander system is one of the most spectacular living monuments to the Machine God known to the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Consecrated into the Cult Mechanicus in the 673rd year of the 9th millennium after the Emperor's Ascension, it remains to this day a prime focus of worship throughout the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Prior to this, it was in the hands of His Most Holy Majesty Uriah Ashok Kagarin III, Overlord of the Salamandan Empire and the weapon's mad architect.

The following data-slates contain a brief history and technical data. However, it is the author's recommendation that only a pilgrimage can truly suffice to study this mighty incarnation of Our Lord, the Machine God.

Magos Artisan: David Pugh

Magos Technician: Ian Pickstock



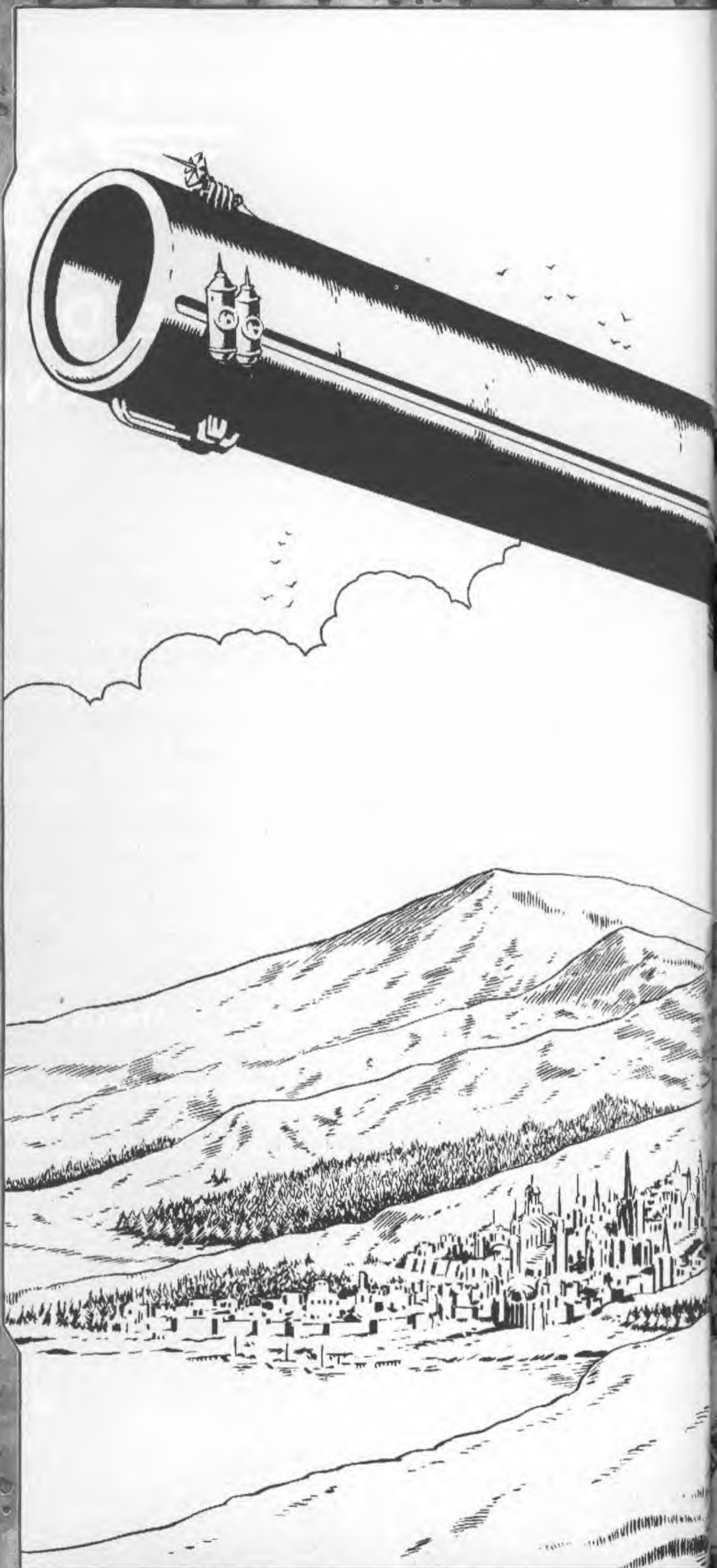
File: 234/99A
Date: 04789789. M39
Auth: Obadiah, J.
Sub: Historical

The architect of this magnificent weapon was none other than the planetary lord of Salamander V.

Convinced that his neighbours, the colonies of Salamander IV and VI, would crave the mineral wealth that lay in his home planet, Lord Kegarin ordered that this gigantic orbital weapon be constructed to protect the planet against any and all invaders.

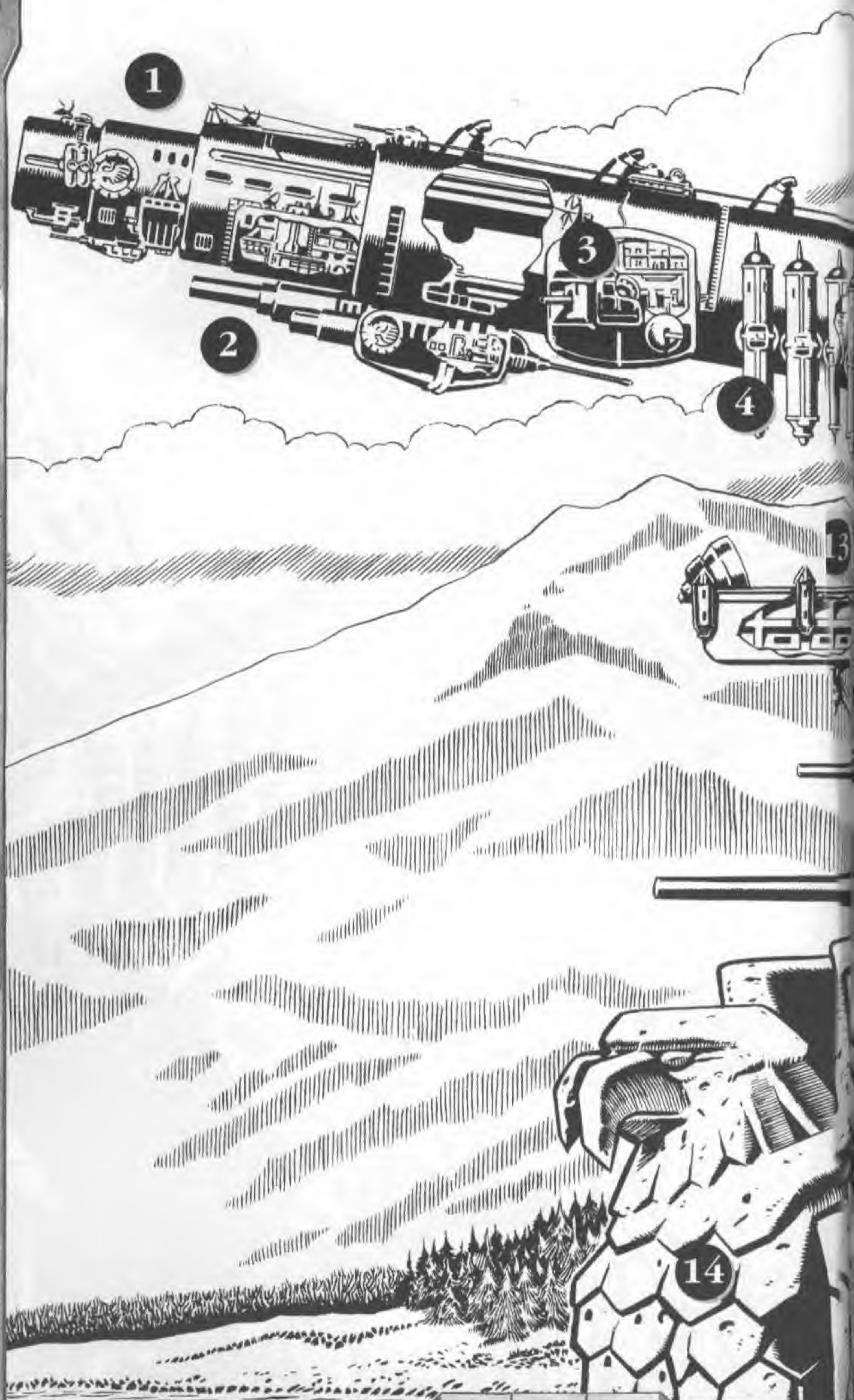
Overcome with paranoia that his neighbours were plotting against him, he declared himself Overlord of the Salamandan Empire and began a long and bloody war.

He almost bankrupted Salamander V, and destroyed most of its natural resources with his final insane plan – **Project Apocalypse.**





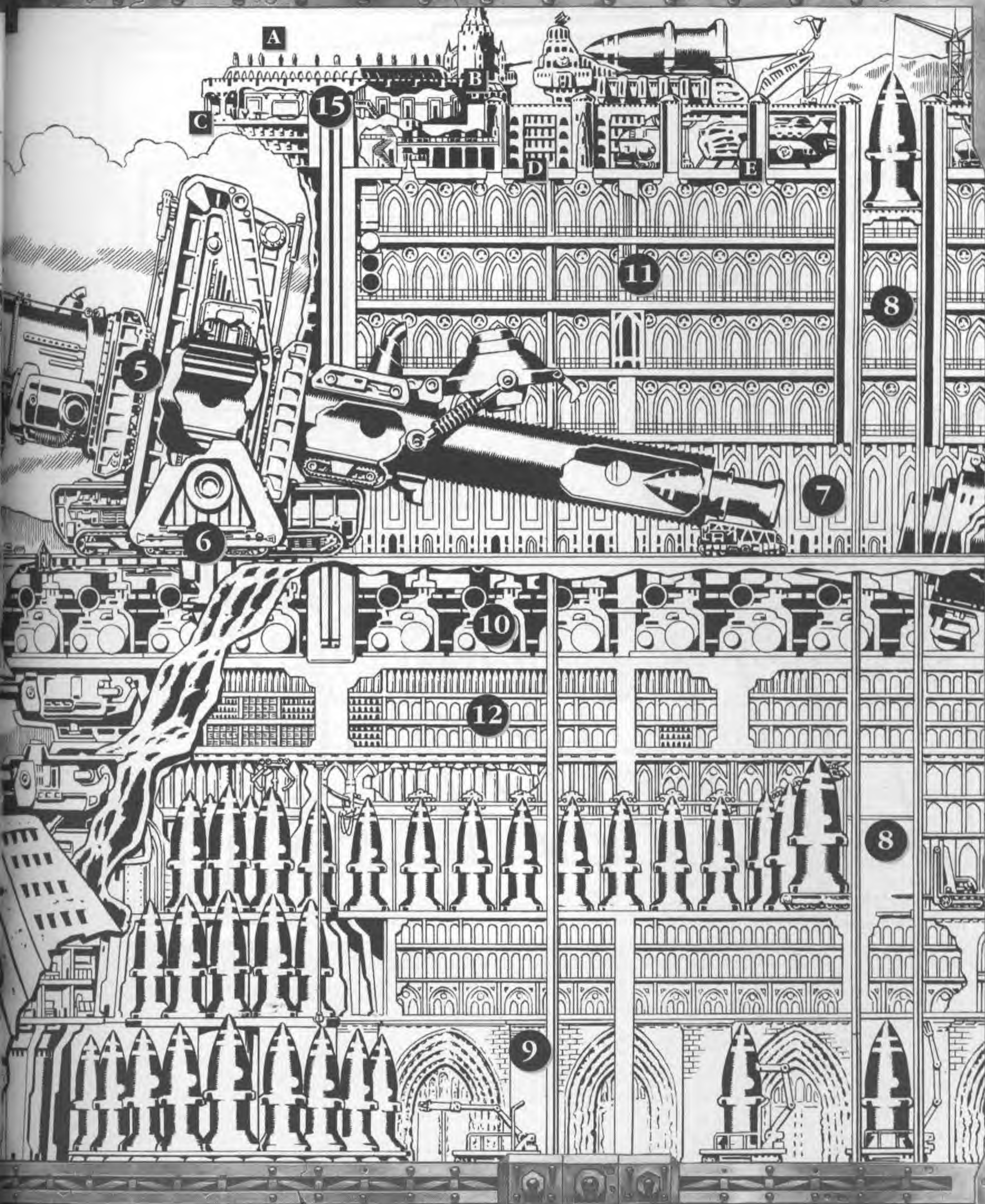
1. Doomsday cannon.
2. Aiming lasers.
3. Targetting comms centre – compiles all data from aiming lasers and orbiting radar stations to get accurate fix on target.
4. Gyro-stabilised Actuators – compensate for gravitational pull of Salamander V.
5. Vertical elevators for major aiming adjustments.
6. Horizontal traverse for fine aiming adjustments.
7. Loading chamber.
8. Loading shaft.
9. Missile arsenal, holds 48 Doomsday missiles.
10. Power station – 24 gas cooled plasma turbines.
11. Troop barracks.
12. Close defence arsenal.
13. Troop landing platform.
14. Eagle command.



15. ROYAL RESIDENCES

- | | |
|--|----------------------|
| A. Private landing pad | C. Viewing balcony |
| B. Chapel of the Emperor's Divine Light. | D. Royal guardhouse. |
| | E. Escape shuttle. |



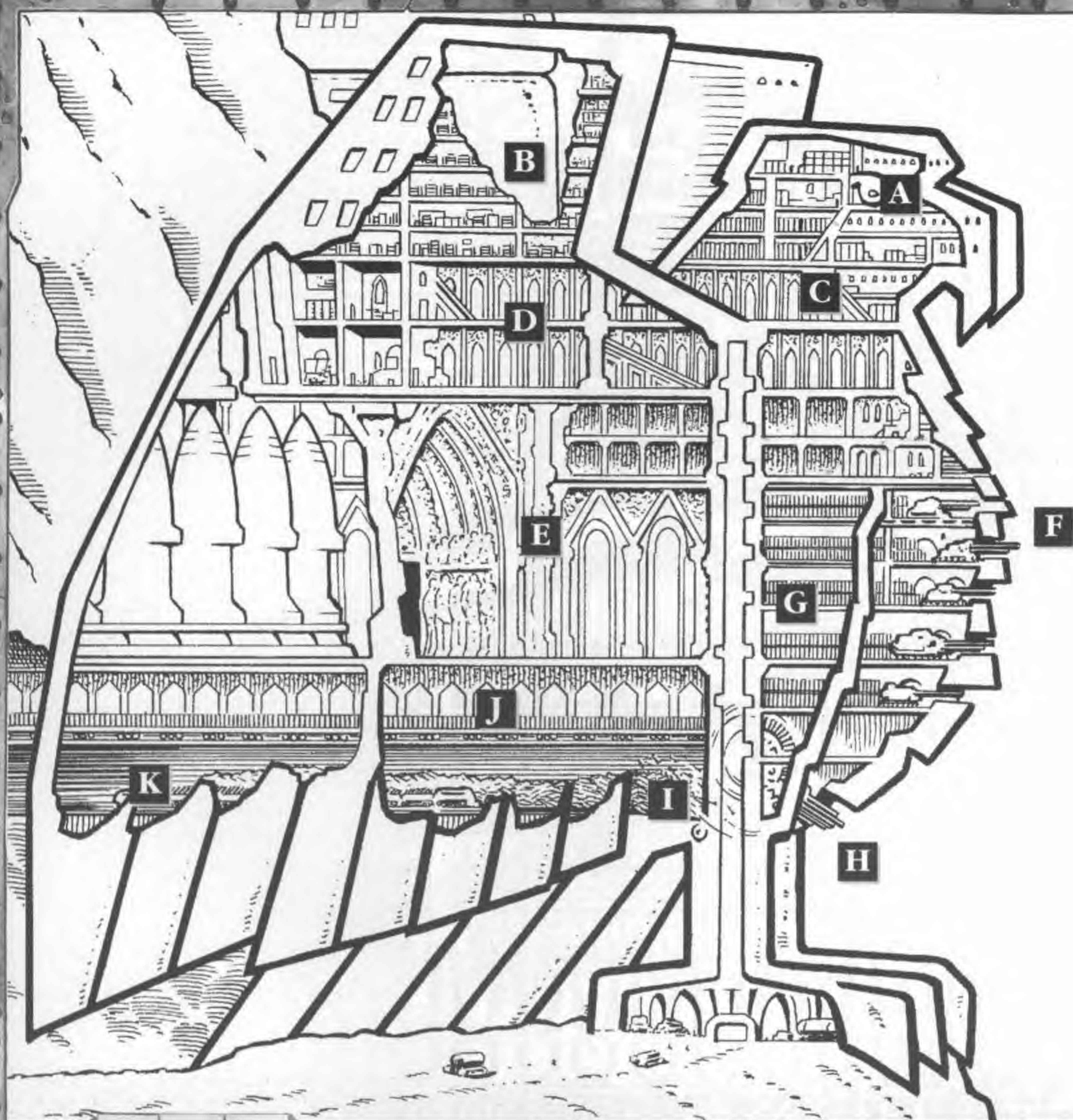


DOOMSDAY CANNON DEFENCES

2 Regiments of Royal Salamandan Defence Guards (10,000 men).

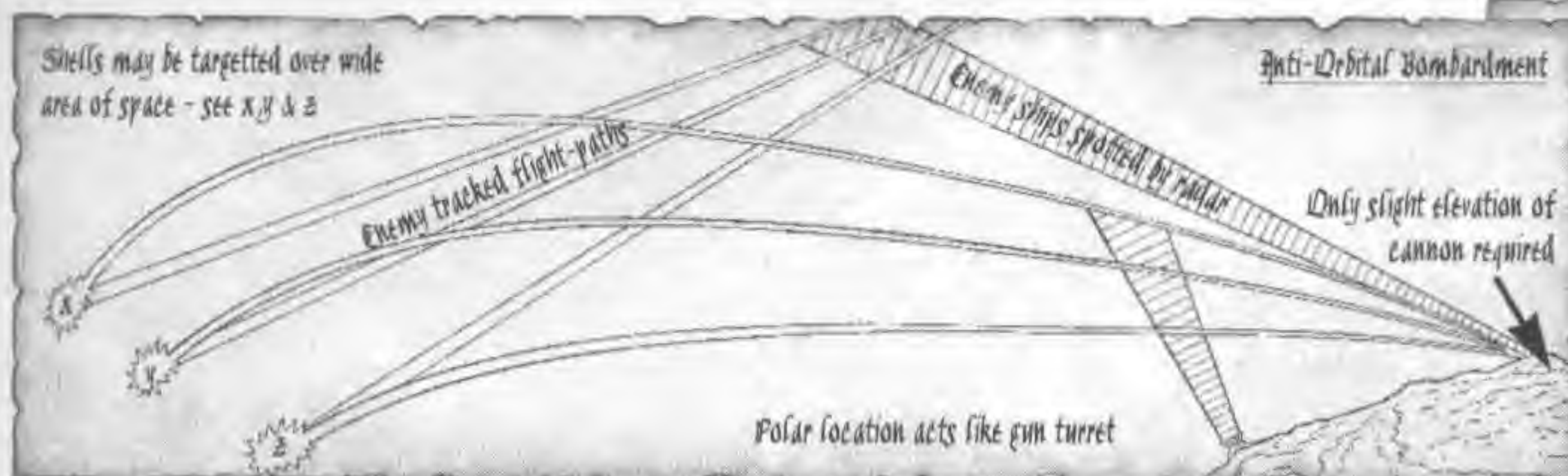
5 Companies of battle tanks, totalling 50 tanks and artillery guns.

4 heavy bore Earthshaker cannon, 25 Battle cannon, 169 Autocannon.



EAGLE COMMAND CENTRE

- | | |
|---|---|
| A. Command HQ. | G. Munition chambers. |
| B. Elite guard barracks. | H. Feeds from close defence arsenal. |
| C. Duty rooms. | I. Cliff assault defences (autocannon and heavy bolters). |
| D. Assembly rooms. | J. Shell case ejection chambers. |
| E. Holy temple of the missile, to allow each missile to be blessed. | K. Shell case recycling. |
| F. Fire wall (12 Battle cannon). | |



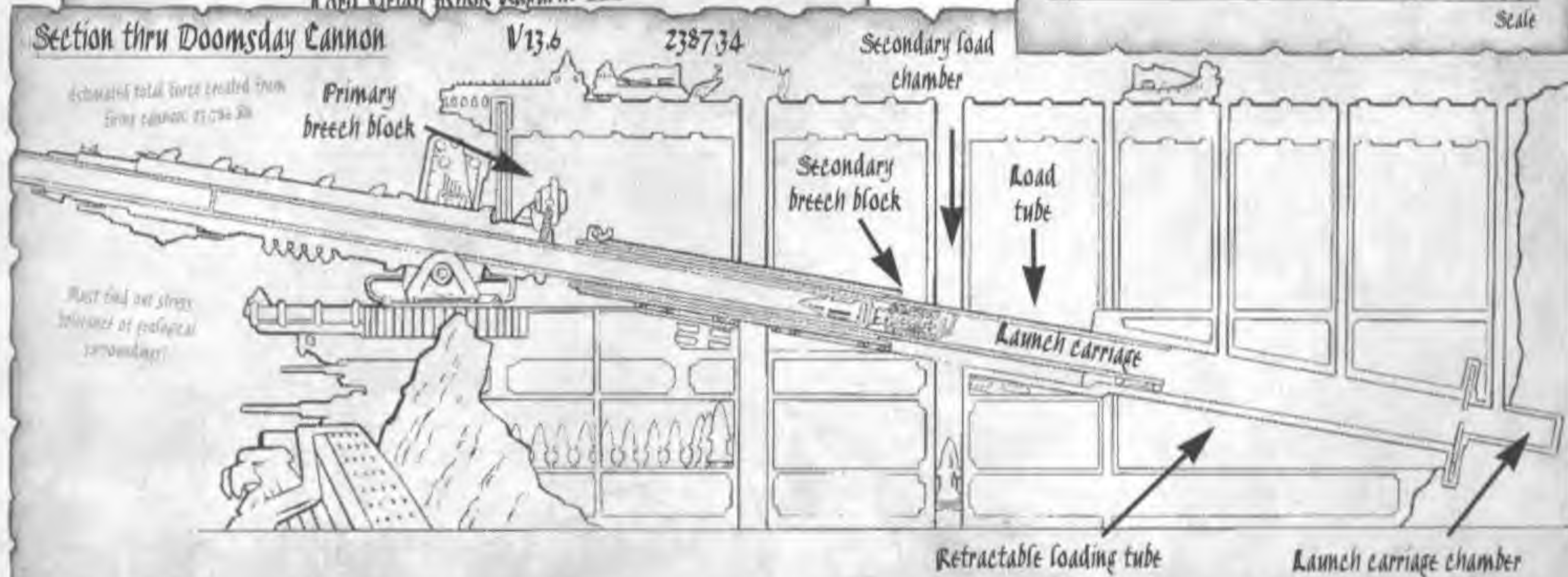
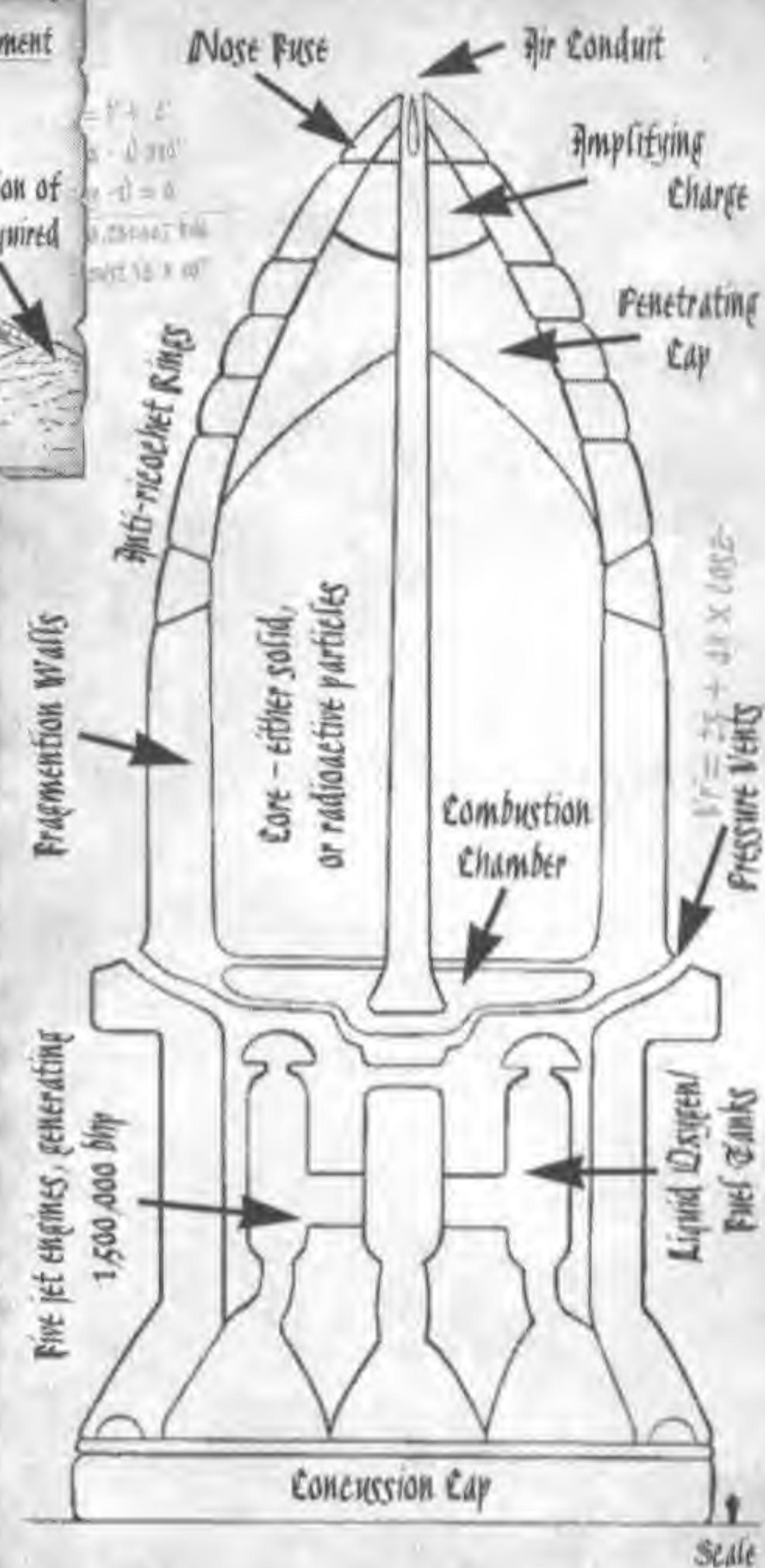
Public Notice

I can now proudly announce to all my loyal tech-priests that I have finalised the modification required to initialise Project Apocalypse.

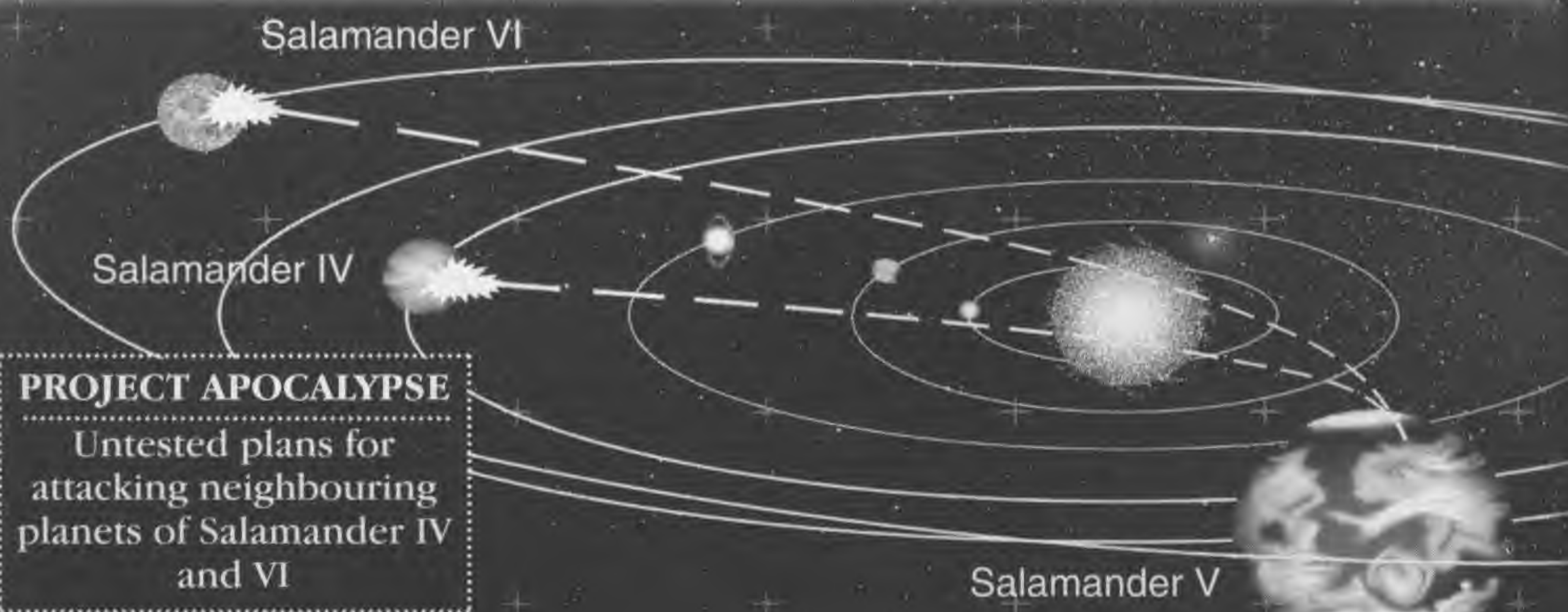
It would now please me if all concerned would make the necessary arrangements to see these plans to fruition. The fate of our kingdom is in your hands. We cannot let the traitorous heretics that would see our world turned to chaos to reign supreme.

I would also like to remind everyone that I have no desire to see a repeat of the incident in Sector Twenty-Three. I do not wish to see further losses from our loyal team, however examples do have to be made, if lessons are to be learnt.

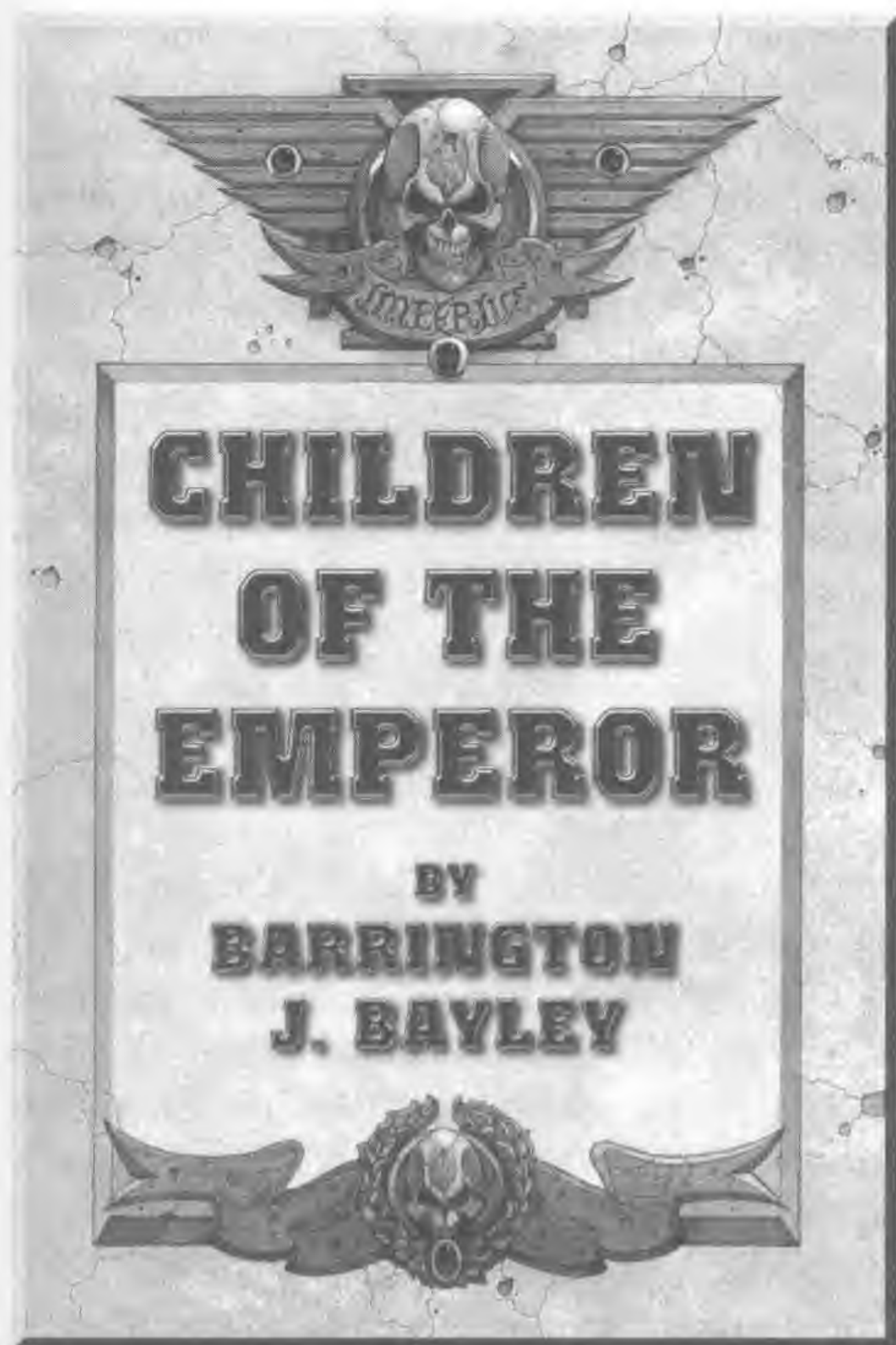
Your Most Royal Majesty
Lord Uriah Ashok Kagarin III



A selection of the few plans and documents that survived the deposing of the Overlord of Salamander V







HOARSE SCREAMS and the screech of tortured hot metal filled the air. Massive laser blasts were punching into the spaceship. They superheated the air that men breathed, set fire to everything that could hum and sent fireballs exploding through the crowded passageways.

Imperial Guardsman Floscan Hartoum found himself in a crowd of jostling, panicking men. Minutes before, the men of the Aurelian IXth regiment had been ordered to the armoury to collect their lasguns and short-swords in case the enemy should manage to teleport aboard. They would never reach the armoury now. The crippled troopship *Emperor's Vengeance* was in a state of absolute chaos. Suddenly a great howl of collective terror rose up. Down the corridor a glowing, writhing red mass had appeared, rolling down the passageway towards them.

Like the others, Floscan turned and ran. He had been at the back of the crowd; now he was at the front. Pushed from behind, he fell, then managed to get his

legs under him and leaped. Behind him he heard an automatic emergency bulkhead descend with a thump.

Staggering to his feet, he found that he was alone in an empty section of corridor. He had been the only one to slither under the bulkhead as it came down. Everyone else was trapped on the other side. Floscan stood, shaking, hearing the fireball slam against the steel partition, accompanied by the agonised shrieks of his comrades who were being incinerated. He pressed his hands to his ears to shut out the cries.

The *Emperor's Vengeance* was old, centuries old. Guardsman Hartoum firmly believed that only the holy rituals carried out daily by the ship's priests kept it in one piece. But it was meticulously tended. The burnished metal ribs of the arch-roofed passageway gleamed. Effigies and efficacious runes, etched at various times by mechanics and priests, adorned the walls. But right now Floscan was blind to all this. The dying screams of his comrades fading behind him, he stumbled to an oval porthole set in a brass surround, and stared blindly out.

He was looking into the star-strewn blackness of space. Unknown kilometres away, the sharp outlines of the attacking ships were visible. Even at this distance they were an extraordinary sight, a motley collection of mongrelised and ramshackle craft, looking for all the galaxy as though they had each been constructed from two or three spacecraft welded crudely together. They had set upon the flotilla of troop transports, clumsy barges only lightly armed, as it emerged from the Warp to take its bearings. The result was utter carnage. The makeshift character of the ships identified their crews as Orks, who did not build spacecraft themselves but used whatever they could capture or scavenge from other races. How they must have roared with savage delight to see units of the Imperial Navy materialise unsuspectingly before them!

Now the flotilla's escorting battlecruiser *Glorious Redeemer* hove into view, a massive structure with baroque, gargoyle-encrusted spires and weapons turrets which were gouting plasma as it

attempted to defend the troopships. But it was heavily out-gunned and had been taken by surprise. Half a dozen Ork ships had surrounded it and their armament was tearing it to pieces, great crenellated chunks spinning off into space.

From another of the Ork craft something came flimmering. It was followed by a juddering shock that went right through the vitals of the *Emperor's Vengeance* with a roaring noise. The passageway buckled. From all around came the cacophony of a ship breaking up. They had been hit by a plasma torpedo!

'ABANDON SHIP! ABANDON SHIP!'

The order crackled through the antique ceiling speakers. Guardsman Hartoum however, needed no prompting. He was already dashing for the nearest escape pods, scrambling over the newly-made folds and rents in the floor.

'Belay that order, Guardsman! Fight to the end against the vile enemies of the Emperor!'

Floscan pulled up sharp. An intimidating figure in a black, square-shouldered longcoat was standing stiffly at the corridor's next bend. It was the Commissar, Leminkanen. The grim expression beneath his peaked cap was nothing new. He wore it all the time, but especially during the fanatical, morale-boosting rallies Floscan had been required to attend.

The order to abandon ship had come from the Captain. Floscan had no idea who ranked higher in this situation, Captain or Commissar, but he did know that if he obeyed the latter he was unlikely to still be alive one minute from now. Instinctively he moved to the nearby pod.

'You will not run in the face of the enemy, Guardsman. Where is your lasgun?'

The last words were drowned out by an enormous squealing of metal being torn apart, followed by the terrifying hiss of air escaping from the ruptured hull. A lasgun suddenly appeared in Commissar Leminkanen's hand. Its lethal beam zipped past Hartoum's ear as he hurled

himself into the lifepod, in the same motion striking the rune-encrusted button that closed the hermetic seal. His hand trembling with panic, he pulled the lever to eject.

Fragments rattled against the pod as it rocketed away from the disintegrating troopship. The fierce acceleration drained the blood from Floscan's brain and he blacked out.



WHEN HE CAME TO, the total silence of the pod's close confines, in which there was barely room to move, was frightening. Even the sound of Floscan's breathing seemed unnaturally loud. He dragged himself to the tiny porthole and peered out.

If there was anything to be seen at all, it consisted of spread wreckage which occasionally drifted between himself and the stars, making them twinkle. The flotilla was destroyed, and with it the Aurelian IXth Regiment. Of the Ork ships there was no sign.

Guardsman Hartoum fell back on the pod's couch, unable to bear the devastating sight.

Aurelia, where Floscan had been raised, was an agricultural world. He had joined the founding Imperial Guard regiment voluntarily, hoping for challenge and adventure. Now that he had found them, he was wishing for his quiet life back on the farm. He firmly believed in the Emperor, of course, but now he was beyond even His help. He was alone, and lost. Rescue was impossible. The Navy would not even know where the flotilla had emerged from the Warp. The pod would keep him alive for a few days, and then...

It would have been better to have died alongside his comrades.

Overcome with despair and even shame at his escape, Floscan buried his face in his hands and sobbed for a while. Then he took a grip on himself. He was an

Imperial Guardsmen, he told himself. The Emperor would expect him to keep up his courage, no matter how bad things became. He steeled himself to face death calmly. Eventually, some dread curiosity drew him back to the porthole. He felt compelled to look again into the void which was to be his grave. When he did, he gasped, his jaw hanging.

There was a planet below him.



FLOSCAN HARTOUM'S heart was beating wildly, thoughts racing through his brain. The planet might have a poisonous atmosphere; it might hold deadly horrors – or it might offer a chance of survival, though he would be marooned for life. It was beautiful, too, with dazzling blue oceans and shining white cloud.

The pod could already be falling towards the planet, or it could be in orbit around it, but most likely it was on a course that would take it out of range and unable to reach the shining world. Hartoum would have to act quickly. He studied the simple controls. Escape pods were manufactured cheaply, in huge numbers, and were best described as crude. Floscan's training in their use had lasted less than twenty minutes, and he barely knew what to do. Luckily, there was little to understand. There were none of the glowing icons and shining runes that would have embellished more sophisticated equipment. Instead there was, included in the moulding of the control panel, a simple prayer to the Emperor:

Fotens Terribilitas, adjuva me in extremis!

Mighty Terribilitas, aid me in my plight!

Fervently muttering the prayer, he took hold of the control levers. The gyro whined, rotating the pod to point its snub nose at the luminous world. The small rocket engine fired again, drawing on the scanty amount of fuel. Floscan was sent hurtling into the planet's atmosphere.

DESPITE IT BEING his only way to see outside, Floscan dogged down the porthole's cover once the buffeting began. He wasn't sure the glassite would be able to withstand the heat that would be generated by the friction of the atmosphere.

The rocket engine had soon ran out of fuel and was silent. Escape pods were supposed to be able to land on a planet automatically, but like everything else about them the arrangements were rudimentary at best, escape for defeated Guardsmen was scarcely high on the Imperium's list of priorities, and Floscan began to feel there was something wrong. Strapped into the acceleration couch, he was being spun around wildly, tossed up and down and jerked from side to side. It was getting very hot, too, making him wish he had cut off the rocket engine sooner. He had hit the atmosphere at too high a speed. The pod's outer layer was supposed to absorb heat and then shed it by peeling away in fragments, but how thick was it? When it was all gone he would be roasted alive. So violent became the descent that Floscan passed out again.

When he next opened his eyes, he did not know how much later, everything had become still. A breeze was on his face. He could hear a distant chirruping sound, as of unknown animal calls.

He had landed.

The acceleration couch had been torn from its moorings and his face had struck the control panel. He threw off the restraint straps and felt his aching cheek. It was bleeding. Automatically he consulted the survival meter under the mangled panel. It told him that the planet had a breathable atmosphere but then he already knew that, because he was already breathing the local air. Evidently the pod had cracked open on impact. He could see daylight through the gaping rent.

His limbs seemed to be made of lead and he was finding it difficult to move, making him fearful of having internal injuries. Several times he struck the rune-inscribed button that should have opened the hatch, but it was stuck. Then he tried to undo the hatch manually. The frame was warped and he was unable to shift it.

Finally, panting with effort, he attacked the rent in the pod's side, placing his feet on one edge and bracing his back against a stanchion. The surprisingly thin shell of the pod moved, making a gap large enough for him to squeeze through.

He tried to stand up and found that he couldn't. He had no internal injuries. It was simply that his body weighed three or four times more than it normally would. He was on a heavy gravity planet. How could he survive if he couldn't even stand up? Guardsman Hartoum struggled to come to his feet. Using his arms, he managed to push himself to a squatting position. Then he heaved with all the strength he could muster in his legs, until he thought the blood vessels would burst.

'God Emperor! Aid me!' Grimacing with effort, Floscan came upright, shaking, feeling the gravity drain him of muscle power and try to drag him down. How long could he maintain himself like this?

He looked around him. The sky was a shining, metallic blue-grey, casting the landscape in a sinister glow. The terrain consisted of rocky crags and low hills to which clung shrub-like trees and crimson reeds. Altogether it was a dismal, depressing environment, over which there seemed to hang a feeling of menace.

The escape pod had cracked open on striking a rocky outcropping. Thick white parachute cords straggled from it but the parachute itself had been torn off sometime during the descent, though presumably not far from the surface or the impact would have killed him.

A stiff cold wind was blowing, making Floscan shiver. Grey clouds raced overhead. He felt dizzy, whether from the blow to his head or because the heavy gravity made it difficult for blood to reach his brain he did not know. And he felt frightened, filled with foreboding. It was hard to believe that only yesterday he had been cursing the monotony of the space journey to an equally unexciting posting.

He was about to sit down again and rest when a hoarse shout made him turn round. He was standing at one end of a shallow valley. Charging along it towards him was a troop of about twenty men.

They were massively muscled, evidently well adapted to the heavy gravity, with shaggy hair which streamed behind them in the wind. Some brandished spears, others raised bows and were whipping arrows from quivers strapped to their backs. And they were heading straight towards him.

Death now seemed both certain and sudden, and all of Guardsman Floscan Hartoum's gloom and uncertainty cleared from his mind. He was defenceless; escape pods carried no lasguns, which were too expensive to waste on men with little or no chance of survival. He doubted if he could run at all, let alone out-distance his pursuers, and if he took refuge in the pod he would only be left trapped like an animal.

He took a deep breath. Best take it like a soldier of the Aurelian IXth. He would go down fighting with his bare hands. But perhaps there was better than that. A flung spear clattered on the rock to his left. He managed to take a few steps, squatted down and lifted the thick wooden shaft off the ground. It was incredibly heavy in his hands, but somehow he heaved himself erect once more and turned to face the enemy, the spearpoint held before him. If he could take just one of the attackers with him, he would have died with honour.

Another spear came hurtling by, together with a flock of arrows, but the aim was poor and all missed him by a wide berth. There seemed to be something strange about the oncoming natives' gait. As they came close enough for him to make them out clearly, he saw that he had been mistaken about them.

They were not men at all, they were four-footed aliens! Seen from the front they looked human enough, clad as they were in short smocks of coarse cloth belted at the waist, but from the side or the rear it was a different matter entirely. The lower back and rump were sloped and extended, and were supported by a second pair of legs. These were just like the front legs except that they were shorter, almost stubby. Both pairs seemed to work in unison, so that the creatures ran with a swift but swaying gait.

The strange spectacle startled Floscan. The induction address at his regiment's Founding flashed through his mind: 'You will be fighting aliens, mutants, monsters, heretics, all things abominable to the Emperor!' Now he was to die in fulfilment of those words!

But instead of rushing straight at him, the troop thundered past. It was charging, not at Floscan, but at something else. Floscan turned to look – and dropped his spear, paralysed with shock.

The quadruped aliens had been shouting warnings, not threats. The valley ended in a craggy hill, like many littering the broken landscape. Emerging over the brow was a monster combination of lobster, crab and armoured centipede – but of stupendous size. It almost covered the hill over which it was clambering, its bossed shell scraping on the rock, hissing sounds issuing from its oscillating mouth parts. As it descended, a giant claw reached out to seize the escape pod, crushing it like an eggshell before dropping it again.

The same claw reached for Floscan. He staggered back, struggling to maintain his footing. Yelling battle-cries, the natives sent spears and arrows clattering against the shiny carapace. They were aiming at the monster's soft parts: waving eyestalks and the broad, dripping mouth that could have taken them all in one go. Stone axes hacked at the claw that was about to pick up Floscan. Chitin splintered, purple ichor flowed and gouted, the limb was severed and lay twitching.

It was incredible to Floscan that the natives would take on this gigantic, fearsome beast with their primitive weapons. And yet they were winning. Two staring golden eyes were transfixed by arrows, a third by a spear. Hissing and screeching, the monster retreated and crawled back over the hill to whoops of victory from the four-footed warriors.

Now their attention turned to Floscan. The leader, a fierce-looking individual with fiery red hair and beard, pointed to him and bellowed an order in a guttural, unintelligible language. A second quadruped dashed forward and seized Floscan, flinging him violently across his

well-muscled, smock-covered back and holding him there in a vice-like grip. The whole troop turned and raced back the way it had come, knocking the breath out of Floscan with every pace.

Once again he had been snatched from the jaws of death. Once again, most likely, to face something worse. He was in the hands of aliens.



ONCE THROUGH the valley, Floscan managed to raise his head and was able to see just how strange and dangerous a world he had come into. It was a nightmare world with its glaring sky, tumbled landscape and gigantic lifeforms. The crab-centipede monstrosities seemed to be everywhere, ambling aimlessly in search of food. The quadrupeds managed to avoid them, but apparently there were more terrifying threats to their existence. They slowed before they had got very far, spreading out and jinking nervously.

Floscan spotted what he thought at first was a factory smokestack rearing high in the air in the distance, such as might be seen in Aurelia's industrial zone. It even belched smoke, or perhaps it was steam, and gave off vague hooting sounds. But it was not a factory chimney. It was alive. It was flexible. And it was bending over, its reeking mouth swooping across the terrain towards the troop.

The quadrupeds scattered, taking cover in rock crevices. From there Floscan watched in fascination. Briefly he saw a ring of eyes around the 'chimney's' circular rim as it picked off a crab-centipede. The monster was sucked struggling into the tube as it whipped upright again, presumably to be drawn into an enormous stomach.

Cautiously the quadrupeds set off once more. Once out of reach of the stack-beast they sought high ground. Floscan was puzzled as to why they would expose themselves so, but from the vantage point of a craggy ridge he got the answer. The

low ground was dotted with a terrifying type of plant-like animal: a house-sized bulb, vaguely resembling a cactus, from which spread dozens of wriggling, searching tentacles, radiating in every direction. Any edible animal they found was whipped back to be devoured.

A quadruped, or anything roughly the size of a man, would have stood no chance trying to cross that deadly network. Floscan's mind whirled. Just how many alien horrors did this planet have to offer? Suddenly the quadrupeds seemed out of place, as if they did not really belong here. They were like hapless insects, ready to be picked off by a host of larger creatures.

But he could think no more, only concentrate on the agony of his rough ride on the back of the native. Though he dreaded what awaited him, it was almost a relief when the quadrupeds' village came in sight. It was fortified with a twenty foot tall hedge bristling with thorns and sharpened stakes. At a shouted signal, a section of hedge was dragged inward allowing them to enter.

The scene within was tumultuous, a throng of four-footed aliens surging among huts thatched with crimson reeds. A blazing fire burned in the centre of the compound, some sort of animal roasting over it on a spit. Floscan was tossed from his carrier and set on his feet, again struggling to stand against the dragging gravity.

Great excitement greeted his arrival. The natives jostled with one another, rearing on their hind legs and uttering exultant cries. Hands grabbed Floscan and pulled him towards the fire. He shrank back, his face slack. Terror coursed through his every nerve. He was destined for the spit! He lost control of himself and began struggling desperately as the flames scorched his face.

Suddenly he was released. A chunk of smoking cooked meat, torn from the roasting carcass, was thrust into his hand. For all the ecstasy of relief he felt, Guardsman Floscan Hartoum discovered that he was hungry. He sniffed the meat. It smelled good. He bit, chewed, then began to eat ravenously. The aliens looked

happier. While he satisfied his hunger, Floscan glanced from side to side. What was in their minds? Were they toying with him, treating him well, before killing him? He had heard that primitive tribes did that.

How strangely human these aliens looked, if one did not look below the waist. True, they were of fierce appearance, and were very broad-set. Floscan, who thought of himself as a burly youth, felt positively slim beside them. And of course he was as weak as a child compared with their rippling muscles.

As he swallowed the last fragment of meat, the natives suddenly fell silent. Their ranks parted to allow the passage of one who had emerged from a nearby hut. He walked slowly and with dignity on his four legs. His face was craggy with age, and his hair and beard were white.

He halted before Floscan, regarding him with steady eyes. Then, to the Guardsman's total surprise, he spoke, not in the unintelligible local speech Floscan had heard earlier, but in a strangled version of Imperial Gothic, so that he had to repeat his question twice before he made himself understood.

'Have you come to us from the Emperor?'

Floscan blinked. How could these primitives on an out-of-the-way planet speak Imperial Gothic and know of the God-Emperor? Aware that his life might well depend on his reply, he thought for a moment and then spoke in a clear voice. 'Yes! I am a warrior of the Emperor!'

The elder was clearly not impressed by these words. He looked Floscan up and down. 'You, warrior? Warrior has weapons. Where are yours?'

Too late, Floscan realised he hardly counted as a fighting man by these natives' standards. He waved his arms defiantly and became theatrical. 'The Emperor sent me through the sky to fight his enemies. I was cast down to this land... but lost my weapons.'

'Then you were defeated,' the aged quadruped grunted. He beckoned. 'Follow.'

He turned and walked with his ambling

gait back to the hut. Floscan tried to follow, but after only a few steps needed to be helped by another quadruped who put out a beefy hand to support him.

Inside the hut, the elder gestured to a reed pallet on the floor. 'More comfortable lying down.'

Thankfully Floscan lowered himself to a sitting position. The old alien did likewise, folding both pairs of legs under him. 'I am Ochtar, the Remembering One of our tribe. My duty is to remember the ancient histories, make sure they are not forgotten.' Floscan could understand his thick accent a little better now. But the next words left him dumbfounded. 'Do you bring us a message from the Emperor? Is he going to take us into the Imperium and make us his children?'

To Guardsman Hartoum such an idea was not only bizarre and sinister, it was also impossible. He had been raised in the Imperial Cult, and his childhood beliefs had been given additional fire during his short time in the Imperial Guard. Already the Aurelian IXth Regiment had helped in the extermination of an alien race who for a while had shared their world with human colonists. Humans could not be expected to live indefinitely on a contaminated planet. He was grateful to the aliens for saving his life, but they *were* aliens.

'It is the Imperium of man, no?' Ochtar insisted, when Floscan failed to answer. 'We are men.'

Floscan looked at the animal-like appearance of Ochtar's lower body. 'Men have two legs!' he burst out without thinking. 'You have four!'

Ochtar sprang to his feet, glaring angrily. 'We are humans with four legs!' Seeing that he had frightened Floscan he calmed down and seated himself again. 'Forgive my anger, Emissary. It is right that you should probe and question. Let me explain. Our ancestors were like you – two legs. Like you, they travelled the sky, searching for new worlds on which to live. Instead, they crashed here and became stranded. That was many, many years ago.

'You have seen what sort of world this is. Where you come from, objects do not weigh very much and one needs only two legs to stand up. Here, everything is heavy. Not only that, but our world is hostile to human life. The ancients who crashed here realised that they would not survive long.

'But they had powerful magic, and they used this to give their children four legs so that they could stand up. And they gave them stronger muscles so that they could fend for themselves. By this means, our people have conquered adversity and have lived for countless generations, even though we have lost the ancient magic. Surely the Emperor will be pleased with us, and bring us into his family?'

Floscan thought hard. If there was any truth in this tale then the quadrupeds' ancestors could even have come from Mars. whose Tech-Priests, the legends said, sent countless ships out into the galaxy during the Dark Age. And yes, they would have had the ability to alter bodies in the way Ochtar described as 'magic'. But the tale was wildly improbable.

'How did you learn the Imperial language?' Floscan asked. 'How do you even know of the Emperor?'

'You are not the first two-legs to come here recently. Magson came. He wanted gemstones. In return, he gave us this. Try it on. It will help you.'

Ochtar stood and drew aside a curtain. He brought out something made of a rubbery material. Floscan's eyes widened when he saw it. It was a heavy-gravity suit, designed to make life tolerable on just such a planet as this.

'Magson stayed long enough for me to learn his language,' Ochtar continued. 'He told us about the Imperium, and about the Emperor who is our God. All our legends were confirmed! We entrusted him with a petition to the Emperor, asking for his rule and guidance. That was years ago. Since then, we have been waiting for you.'

From the sound of it, this Magson was a Free Trader. It was most unlikely he had even reported the existence of the quadrupeds to the authorities, let alone

forwarded the petition to the Administratum on Terra. Usually such traders heeded no one but themselves.

Floscan guessed he had the explanation of Ochtar's claim to be human too. Ochtar was obviously highly intelligent – to have learned Imperial Gothic from a passing stranger was no mean feat. But he must have concocted the myth on hearing of the marvels of the Imperium, perhaps confusing the Imperial Cult with some tribal beliefs and so believing it himself.

'I can prove what I said,' Ochtar added then, as if reading his thoughts. 'I will take you to the holy shrine of our ancestors. We will travel at night, when it is safer. Put on the cloth that takes away weight.'

Floscan accepted the h-g suit Ochtar handed to him. Inspecting the runic icons on the shoulder tabs, he could see why the trader Magson had been so ready to trade it. The suit's power was low. Also it seemed to be damaged, no doubt ready to cut out at any time. Just the same, he pulled it on and immediately felt relief from the crippling gravity. He stood up, stretched and smiled.

His smile vanished as he remembered that he was going to have to spend the rest of his life here.



OCHTAR LEFT HIM alone to let him rest. Floscan spent the hours before darkness deep in thought. For about an hour he became very depressed, realising that he was never to see another human being again. Whatever life was left to him would have to be spent with these four-footed villagers. Without them, he had no chance of surviving at all.

Then, once again, he rallied, and became determined to see things through. Some said the Emperor watched over all that were worthy of the title Guardsman. He would prove his mettle.

He was going to have to humour Ochtar for the time being. It was essential that the quadrupeds accepted him. For the time being, he switched off the h-g suit to

conserve its power. Besides, he needed to build up his muscles; eventually he would need to withstand the dreadful gravity.

Night fell abruptly, like a curtain. Soon Ochtar returned and explained the journey that lay ahead. 'We are going to visit the Temple of the Ancient Relics,' he said. 'It is deserted now, and we shall have to travel with caution, for it lies within the territory of the enemy.'

'You have enemies?' Floscan replied curiously.

Ochtar nodded curtly. 'The worshippers of the evil God of Blood. Once they were our friends, but now...'

He would say no more, and Floscan turned on the h-g suit once more. Guards pulled the hedge-gate open. They crept out, Ochtar looking to left and right.

Within the defensive circle of the hedge, the fire was kept burning at all times so that even at night the village had a cheerful look. Outside was an eerie darkness relieved by a dim, silvery light cast by massed stars, though the sky boasted no moons. Floscan soon learned that Ochtar's description 'safer' at night did not mean 'safe' when a living tangle of hooks and barbs the size of a small armoured vehicle flew at them. Ochtar proved himself a master spearman, despite his age. Instead of trying to evade the barbs he lunged straight at them and struck home. The raving mass jerked wildly from side to side, then slumped. He had penetrated the creature's tiny brain.

Ochtar brushed a dozen sharp hooks from his skin, ignoring the trickling blood. 'They wait around villages hoping to catch children who stray,' he said. 'They're not much to worry about.'

Ochtar knew his world well. He took Floscan on a wandering route that avoided the haunts of night predators, though Floscan shivered to hear a chaos of grumbling, hissing and clacking noises all around them. After a while he evidently became dissatisfied with his companion's progress, and invited him to climb onto his back. With Floscan clinging to him he set off at a tireless gallop, the great shaft of his spear resting on his

shoulder. Eventually he slowed, and set Floscan on his feet again. From then on he proceeded carefully, sliding from cover to cover and looking carefully about him as he went.

They came at last to a natural amphitheatre. At its bottom, a ruined stone temple glittered faintly in the starlight. Its shape was hard to make out. There was a circle of broken pillars, and within it the remains of a round building which might once have been domed. It must have been thousands of years old.

Alert for any savage beast which might be using the temple as a lair, Ochtar approached carefully, but all was quiet. They stepped within lichen-covered walls. The roof had gone long ago. Light from the star-clouds streamed into the circular enclosure, revealing an unexpected, wondrous display.

Strange machines! Ochtar stood in silence, allowing Floscan to take in the wondrous view. This was indeed a holy place! Floscan felt as though he had been transported to the ancient, ancient past, to the legendary Dark Age of Technology and the days of the Cult Mechanicus. Plainly the machines had once been arranged with reverence so that they could be worshipped as a sacred shrine, but now they were scattered across the ruined chamber, some of them smashed to pieces while others had simply fallen apart. A few, however, appeared to be still intact, matt black surfaces gleaming, rectangular display screens reflecting the starlight. They were like no machines Floscan was familiar with, and their purpose was a mystery, but there were plain signs that they were designed to be operated by humans, in the form of keyboards, knobs and slides.

'The ancient ones from the sky came to our world with these sacred objects,' Ochtar told him in a hushed tone. 'By these means they could work magic, though how we do not know.'

Presumably the quadrupeds had thought better than to reveal the shrine to the trader, Magson. He would certainly have wanted to take them away with him. They represented arcane sciences superior, perhaps, even to those of the present-day

Imperium. The shrine-machines might even contain examples of long-lost Standard Template Construction, sought throughout inhabited space!

And all this meant that Ochtar's claim was true. The quadrupeds *were* of human stock! During the two campaigns in which he had served, Floscan had seen abhumans. He had seen Ogryns and Beastmen, degenerate forms of human of low intelligence. He could not help but compare them with the noble Ochtar. But for his weird lower limbs, he was much more human than they had been. Furthermore, the physical difference had been arranged by the arts of the ancient Tech-Priests, not left to the vagaries of evolution. Did they not, then, deserve the Emperor's recognition? Yes they did!

While these thoughts whirled through his brain, a drumming sound came to Floscan's ears. Ochtar heard it, too. He capered round on all four legs, glaring, spear at the ready. 'Worshippers of the Blood God! We were seen, Emissary! Hide yourself!'

A savage roar rose all around them. Swarming down the slope of the amphitheatre was a spear-bearing, axe-waving mob of quadrupeds clad in shaggy animal skins or armour fashioned from the shells of the crab-monsters. On their heads were helmets consisting of the emptied carapaces of smaller armoured creatures, complete with claws – or, in some cases, what appeared to be human skulls!

By the silvery starlight Floscan saw all this clearly through the gaps in the temple wall. When the quadrupeds got closer he saw, even more clearly, why they could not be of Ochtar's tribe. Their faces were tattooed, transforming them into hideous masks. The good-natured ferocity of Ochtar's people was completely absent; instead were the bestial snarls, hate-filled grimaces and blood-curdling shrieks of those bent on wanton murder and destruction. Floscan shrank back at first, thinking to hide as he had been instructed, but when he saw the old Remembering One dash from the temple, apparently determined to defend the Emperor's Emissary to the last, he could

not help himself. He looked around for something to use as a weapon.

Now the attackers were within the circle of pillars. Ochtar thrust his spear into the chest of the first to reach him, bringing the savage down. Floscan grabbed up a piece of fallen masonry, hefting it despite its weight, and ran to his aid. Ochtar had his back to one of the pillars, surrounded and sorely pressed. Floscan did not think he could throw the rock – it would simply fall from his hand. He ran forward and struck with all his might against a crab-protected head, aiming for the exposed cheek bone. The quadruped merely staggered a little and turned to give Floscan a look of outrage. Sour-smelling breath washed over Floscan from a snarling, tattooed and scarred face. He glimpsed a stone axe flashing down towards his skull.

Then the axe was miraculously stayed; another warrior had deflected it. Instead, rough hands seized him. In that same moment, sheer weight of numbers overcame the struggling Ochtar, three spears lunging into him at once, his legs buckling, so that he was brought down like some magnificent animal by a yapping pack of predators. He turned piteous eyes to the struggling Floscan.

‘Tell the Emperor... we are human...’

Then Floscan, held in a steely grip, was forced to watch in horror as with jubilant screeches the killers continued to hack and stab at the body of the Remembering One until it was nothing but a bloody mass.

Eventually, leaving off their gruesome work, they turned to stare inquisitively at Floscan. As well as their elaborate tattoos, each face bore intricate tribal scars, so that it was difficult to discern any human features at all. Floscan stared straight back at the devilish masks, clenching his fists. For the moment rage burned all the fear out of him. Ignorant savages had murdered a brave worshipper of the Emperor. If only he could deliver the full vengeance of the Imperial Guard on them!

Mocking laughter arose among the quadrupeds. Did they perhaps regard him

as a two-legged cripple, an object of mirth?

While this went on, something else was afoot. Roaring warriors charged into the temple and began smashing the precious ancient relics. Others collected bundles of a dry, mossy material that grew nearby, piling it over the mysterious machines. A spark was struck from two fragments of stone, setting the floss alight. Soon the machines themselves were burning, with a brilliant white, seething flame, forcing everyone out of the Temple. Suddenly there was a loud explosion and an enormous glare, bringing down the remains of the ruin and hurtling stone chunks into the crowd. Something amongst the machinery – perhaps long-dead fuel cells – had ignited.

This turn of events seemed to scare the raiders. Floscan was dragged roughly on to a quadruped’s back and the whole pack set off with alarmed howls, scrambling up out of the amphitheatre and streaming into the darkness.

The ride did not last long. The alien sun was rising when the village of the tattooed four-legs came into sight. Like Ochtar’s, it was protected by a high thorn hedge, a section of which was dragged inward to allow them to enter.

Set on his feet, Floscan stared around him in fascination. There seemed to be a pattern to the quadrupeds’ settlements. Within the compound was the same circle of reed-thatched huts and a central fire. But here the atmosphere vibrated with savagery and violence. Fighting was a way of life; several brawls seemed to be happening at any one time.

Except for females and the young, all faces were scarred and tattooed. Floscan’s eyes were drawn to a huge totem pole towering over the huts near the central fire. Carved on it was a huge, crimson, maniacally glaring face, eyes bulging, teeth bared, seeming to radiate a lust for death and battle. The Blood God.

Floscan was dragged into a nearby hut and tied by his hands to a rough wooden post. After his captors left, and his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he realised that he was not alone. A second

prisoner was slumped on the ground, tied to a wooden post wearing a thick black greatcoat.

It was Commissar Leminkanen!



FOR ALL HIS hunched dishevelled state, crushed as he was by the excessive gravity, Commissar Leminkanen was still formidable. His glinting, steely gaze directed itself at Floscan from beneath his peaked cap. Floscan realised that the heavy gravity suit hid his uniform.

'I am Guardsman Hartoum, Commissar, from the *Emperor's Vengeance*,' he said quickly.

'Did you desert your post, Guardsman?' Leminkanen accused in a grating voice. Then, not waiting for an answer, he added, 'I, too, was on that ship. The last thing I remember is when the torpedo struck us. Someone must have put me in an escape pod. I was already falling through the atmosphere when I regained my senses – with my laspistol missing from its holster! Do you have yours, Guardsman?'

It was a relief to Floscan that the Commissar did not remember trying to 'absolve' a panicking trooper by executing him in the transport ship's last moments. 'No, Commissar. I am unarmed.'

Leminkanen grunted. The Commissar seemed eager to explain his presence on the planet. Could he have thrown himself into an escape pod out of self-preservation, just as Floscan had? But then he would still have his laspistol... unless the quadrupeds had taken it from him... in which case they would have searched Floscan for one too. So he had to be telling the truth. Floscan felt ashamed to have doubted him.

Leminkanen was frowning at him, perhaps puzzled to see him in an h-g suit. 'Did anyone but ourselves escape the battle?' he asked sharply.

Floscan shook his head. 'Not as far as I know. The entire flotilla was destroyed.

The Aurelian IXth is gone!' A sob came into his voice. 'I may be the only one left! And no one even knows where in space we came out of the Warp...'

'You are an ignorant young fool, Guardsman. We are deep inside a planetary system! Ships cannot emerge from the Warp this close to a star, except by means of a known and charted Warp gate. The Navy will be here to investigate when the flotilla fails to arrive.

'Not that you or I will benefit from it. We are in the hands of aliens, of the most savage and perverted type. In the next few hours they will torture us to death. You are lucky to have me with you. I will help you face the end with fortitude, keeping your faith in the Emperor.'

Floscan gulped, impressed though he was by Leminkanen's steadfastness. 'Are you sure, Commissar?' he whispered.

'Of course I am sure! Have you seen that totem outside? I have seen that same image on half a dozen worlds. It is the emblem of a Chaos god, the god of slaughter and destruction. These aliens are its devotees.'

'The Blood God,' Floscan murmured. 'That's what they call it.'

'Then you have heard of it too. Yes, the Blood God! That's what it is called, all across the galaxy.'

'But surely the Emperor is the only true god?' Floscan had heard stories about the Chaos gods on Aurelia, but he had taken them to be fanciful superstitions. The Commissar's words sounded strange to him.

'The Emperor is the only true god, but the Chaos gods are real, too,' Leminkanen assured him. 'They oppose the Emperor, and are responsible for every evil and depravity. Here we have two enemies of the Emperor together – aliens, and a Chaos god!'

Floscan could not contain himself. 'These people are not aliens, Commissar – they are human!' he cried out. 'And some of them worship the Emperor, praise His name!'

In a rush of words he related everything that had happened since he was deposited on the planet: his rescue from

the crab-monster, the gift of the h-g suit, how Ochtar had proved his claim to be human. The Commissar listened closely, growing more and more astounded.

'Standard Template?' he breathed in excitement. 'Are you sure it is all destroyed?'

'There can't be anything left after the fire and the explosion.'

'We shall see.'

Floscan was not really concerned with that. 'Will good tribes like Ochtar's be admitted into the Imperium?' he asked eagerly. 'After all, there are plenty of other abhumans.'

Leminkanen's voice rose in impassioned fury. 'How many times must I tell you that you are a fool, Guardsman; Ogryns and the like are natural human types. A human being with four legs is an abomination! It is a mutant! And a mutant is a child of Chaos! It cannot be allowed to live!'

His voice fell to an exhausted drone. 'It is a good thing we have discovered this. We must leave a record for the investigators. There is nothing here but twisted human mutation and the undeniable taint of Chaos. My report will recommend the cleansing of this entire planet.'

Floscan sank into an appalled silence. Had the quadrupeds been listed as aliens they would have been left alone – the Imperium could not exterminate every alien race in the galaxy, meritorious though that ideal was. But now he had doomed them to extinction!

The heavy gravity was clearly too much for Leminkanen. His frenzied speech seemed to have exhausted what was left of his strength. He fell into a fitful doze. Floscan was almost sorry he could not give him the h-g suit for a while.

The worshippers of the Blood God did not seem to be in any hurry. After several hours, the crude door opened and a bearded, tattooed quadruped, smelling like a goat and wearing a jerkin made from a bristling porcupine-like skin, entered and raised a bowl of water to Floscan's lips. Glancing at the sleeping Commissar, he merely grunted and went out again.

The next time the door opened, a throng of leering, mocking faces crowded around the opening, then drew aside to reveal the result of the morning's work. It was a large oval container, shaped from clay. Floscan easily recognised it for what it was: an oven, able to take two men inside it. Beneath it was a fireplace already piled with wood. Jeering laughter greeted the look on Floscan's face as he stared at the thing.

He and the Commissar were to be baked alive.

The closing door shut out the horrid grimacing faces. Shortly it began to grow dark again. The brief day was ending, and outside it was growing quiet as the worshippers of the Blood God retired to their huts. Floscan could guess that the grisly death-rite, undoubtedly a sacrifice to their foul Blood God, was scheduled for the next day.

Leaning trembling against the post to which he was tied, he began thinking with terror of the excruciating death which was shortly to come upon him. Then he started thinking of his comrades of the Aurelian IXth who had suffered hardly less painful deaths on the Emperor's Vengeance. Some had been personal friends back in his home district of Aurelia.

He stopped shaking. Resolve formed in him. He owed a duty to his dead comrades, to his superior officer Commissar Leminkanen, and a debt of gratitude to Ochtar and his people. He had to change Leminkanen's mind about them. And above all, he wished to avoid the clay oven.

All day long Floscan had been working on his bonds, with little effect. Now an idea came to him. The h-g suit had metal ribs with squared off edges. He worked the braided cord to one of these and began to rub.

It was slow work, but in the end his patience was rewarded. The hut was in near-darkness by the time he had worn down the cord enough so that he could break it. Finally he stood unfettered, and glanced at the sleeping form of Commissar Leminkanen. Briefly he considered trying to take the Commissar

with him, before realising that it would be impossible. Leminkanen's only hope – and it remained a faint one – was for Floscan to bring help.

He slipped from the hut, moving with the stealth of a shadow. As he had expected the village was sleeping, with sentinels posted atop the hedge fortification. But he spotted only two, and neither was looking his way. Floscan sidled to the hedge. The foot-long thorns made it perfectly easy to scale, and in moments he was over the top and down the other side. Crouching, he took stock. Tonight the sky was cloudy and few stars were visible. Of the terrain, there were only vague humps in the darkness. Still, he thought he could remember which way to go.

He pulled at one of the sharpened stakes which made the hedge bristle. It came out easily. Now he had a weapon. Silently, Imperial Guardsman Hartoum loped off into the lightless unknown, intent on retrieving the honour of the Aurelian IXth.



ALL THAT NIGHT Floscan travelled, trying not to stray from his chosen direction, trying to suppress his fright. Clicking, buzzing, rattling noises sounded all around him. All too often he thought he felt a chill touch – a claw, a feeler, a rasp, a feathery antenna – causing him to lash out with the stake in a sidewise swipe or a jab with the point, often followed by the sound of something scuttling away. Dawn found him weary. Something else found him, too.

He first became aware of it as a sharp, acid smell. Then it charged from behind a rock to attack him. It was about twice the size of a horse, but in appearance like a cockroach whose head was a mass of razor-sharp sword blades sliding in and out with a scything sound, rubbing against one another. At their full extent they were as long as his stake.

He took a lesson from Ochtar. To retreat was death – therefore, attack! He ran at the animal, which in turn was scurrying towards him, eager to slice him to bits with its battery of blades. Go for the brain. Ochtar had taught him that too. A bubbling, whistling noise came from the creature as he pushed the stake in as hard as he could. Then it turned on its back, a dozen stubby legs waving in death agony.

As he withdrew the stake, from which a purple goo dripped, a sensation of irresistible weight seized him. He looked at the icons, and groaned. The h-g suit had lost power.

Floscan sank to his knees. Where was the village? The creature was but the first and smallest of the monsters that were likely to find him. Others would be gigantic, impossible to fight even with a fully functioning h-g suit. Abandoning the stake, he was reduced to crawling on all fours as his own weight settled on him, dragging him into a pit of despair. Soon even this was too much. He was forced to lie down and close his eyes in exhaustion.

The sound of a human voice awoke him with a start. A quadruped stood over him, clad in a cloth tunic, lacking facial scars and tattoos, and with no claw-bearing helmet. One of Ochtar's people! Floscan struggled to sit up. Had he made it out of the territory of the Blood God? Or were the Remembering One's tribe looking for him after he had failed to return?

'Ochtar is dead! Blood God! They have messenger from the Emperor! Going to kill him!' Floscan pleaded. Had Ochtar been the only one to understand Imperial Gothic? Had he taught it to any of the others? The quadruped looked at him, frowning.

'Blood God? Emperor? Blood God kill Emperor?'

'Yes! Help Emperor!'

For the first time he noticed a large curved horn hanging from the four-leg's neck. The tribesmen raised it to his lips and blew a long, winding blast.

More warriors appeared among the crags and began making their way down to them. Floscan's guess seemed to been correct: they were searching for Ochtar,

and must already have been to the destroyed temple. The quadruped with the horn began bellowing commands, flinging out his arm in the direction Floscan had indicated. In moments a small horde was racing for the village of the Blood God. A hand came down, helping Floscan up and on to a sturdy back. Heart exulting, he hung on for all his worth – and realised that his limbs no longer seemed so heavy. Glancing at the h-g icons, he grinned. The suit's photoelectric stripes had been soaking up sunlight. The h-g field was re-energised!

For ferocity the assault on the village would have done the Imperial Guard credit. Taken by surprise, the devotees of the Blood God forayed through the gate at first, attempting to defend their settlement outside its bounds, but they were soon driven back. The attacking warriors swarmed up over the hedge and down into the compound, climbing it as Floscan had. He mounted it too and watched from the top as axes rose and fell, spears jabbed, blood flowed.

The Blood God's followers were fighting for their homes, fighting for their lives, fighting for their savage god, and they laid about them as if demented, their bestial roars filling the air. But Ochtar's people were fighting for a god, too – the Emperor! It was hard to say who would be the victor at this stage; it was as if the butchery would continue until there was almost no one left. Floscan chose his moment to drop into the compound and dodge his way to the prison hut near the newly-constructed oven, which he was glad to see had not been used yet.

In the dim interior, Leminkanen looked up at him in wonderment. He did not even speak as the Guardsman untied him and helped him to his feet, supporting his weight.

'We have been rescued, Commissar!' Floscan yelled. 'By four-legged men who are loyal to the Emperor! Did I not tell you?'

Leminkanen's response was a look of sour disbelief and an emphatic shake of his head. Nevertheless, he allowed Floscan to guide him gingerly to the door.

There, an extraordinary sight met their eyes. The fighting had all but stopped. Something had wrapped itself around the village. It was like a millipede, many hundreds of metres long, which had coiled around the circular hedge-wall, though it overtopped it by nearly half its height again. From each of its countless segments sprouted a pair of tentacles tipped with eyes, lashing down into the compound to pick up defenders and attackers alike, whipping them over the hedge to be devoured.

Perhaps the smell of blood from the battle had attracted it. The spectacle seemed to send Leminkanen into a frenzy. He pushed Floscan away from him and staggered through the doorway, forcing himself to stand erect.

'I must make my report! Order the Exterminatus! Guardsman, if I am martyred you must deliver it into the right hands!'

From within his greatcoat he whipped out a flat grey plate that he unfolded to reveal a keypad. It was his personal log. Feverishly he began keying, oblivious of what went on around him.

'Look out, Commissar!' Floscan lunged to knock the Commissar aside, but it was too late.

A slithering tentacle had seized him, pinning his arms to his body. With a barely heard gurgle, Leminkanen was gone.

Floscan snatched up the log-plate as it fell to the dusty ground, nimbly avoiding a flailing tentacle as he did so. By now the tribesmen were dealing with the millipede-beast in their own fashion. They had set the hedge alight, but so intent was the beast on its feeding that it ignored the flames until it was too late. It, too, caught fire, writhing soundlessly, crushing huts in its agony while an indescribably foul-smelling smoke filled the air.

Everything in the village was burning now, everything was being flattened as the blazing monster flexed and rolled, forcing villagers and invaders to flee as one for the exit or trample their way through the glowing cinders of the collapsing hedge, the battle forgotten. Floscan too was caught up in the stampeding rush.

Out in the open the two sides drew apart, glaring at one another. It was doubtful if they even remembered what they were fighting over, but they were ready to begin again.

Then a glinting movement high in the air made Floscan look up. His heart leaped. His prayer to the Emperor was answered. All around Floscan, four-legged men dropped to their knees. A large, shining metal shape was descending. It was an Imperial shuttle craft.



THE AURELIAN IXth's sole survivor handed this in, sir. It appears that Commissar Leminkanen was making his last report when he was killed.'

In his brass-ornamented cabin Captain Gurtlieder, commander of the battleship *Ravenger*, took the Commissar's data-slate from his officer's hand. He noticed that the log was not closed. Leminkanen had not even had time to finish the report or key in his code.

He tapped a key and began to read.

++Emergency report by Commissar Lemuel Leminkanen LX/38974B on unnamed planet in Cluster FR/7891 in vicinity of Warp Gate 492.

This planet is of no value to the Imperium. It is a feral world of the most extreme violence and would be very difficult to colonise. It contains a primitive semi-intelligent alien species unlikely to advance further. Recommend no action particularly on account of

There it ended.

'Who is this survivor?' Captain Gurtlieder asked.

'Just a Guardsman, sir. He was with Commissar Leminkanen to the end. He appears to have acquitted himself well in difficult circumstances. I shall be recommending his promotion when he is reassigned.'

The captain handed back the data-slate. 'Very well. See that this is passed on to the Administratum.'

DOWN IN THE crew quarters of the *Ravenger*, Guardsman Floscan Hartoum was feeling very nervous indeed. Once aboard the battleship, he had contrived to be alone for a while. He could not resist taking a look at Commissar Leminkanen's open log.

Leminkanen had opened the log using his personal code, but that got no further than the heading, stating time and place. The millipede-creature had eaten him at that point.

So Floscan, appalled at his own audacity, had made an entry of his own. He couldn't close the entry, of course, since he didn't know Leminkanen's code. So he had left it in mid-sentence, hoping that made it look all the more authentic.

He dreaded to think what would become of him if it was ever discovered that he had made a false entry in a Commissar's log. But he had realised that neither Leminkanen nor any other agent of the Administratum would ever look favourably on the quadrupeds once their human ancestry was known.

A mutant is a mutant. They had altered themselves too much. And there was the taint of Chaos too... Well, now they would be registered as aliens and left alone. Floscan had already heard that Warp Gate 492 was to be marked as unusable on the charts, a deadly trap now that it had been discovered by the Orks, who must have been lurking nearby waiting for Imperial vessels to emerge. The planet would receive no more visitors.

For the hundredth time he wondered if it was true that the Emperor saw everything. Did He know what Floscan had done? And did He approve or abhor Floscan for it?

Floscan took it as a good sign that no one had questioned why he was wearing an h-g suit.

A war between good and evil was shaping up on the quadrupeds' planet. He hoped, of course, that the Blood God would be defeated. But whatever the outcome, it was going to be settled by the quadrupeds themselves.

Though sadly, outside of the Family of Man. ●

The Epistle of JOHANNES BLANC.

CHAPTER 411

FOR seven mornings we had seen the sun rise above the horizon and watched its rays glisten off the magnificent *spires* which rose up above the wasteland, bringing us fresh hope *that* our great journey was at an end. Our great leader, the Seer Abramus, he could only be called the Enlightened One, said it would be a glorious place, a place fit for weary souls such as ourselves to rest.

2 And so it was upon the forty-first day that we came to rest *at* the gates of the mighty Babylon.

3 It was a dismaying sight that met our eyes. The city *was* all broken and crumbled, a vile stench hung in the air, and a vile and leprous man sat upon a pillar and he did spake unto us.

4 Dire warnings he did offer, his voice ranting with talk of disease and filth, and hideous wasting diseases. He *lamented* long about boils and pestilent sores such as was evident on his own decrepit carcass. 'Death to *all* who enter the walls of Babylon, death to all who enter within these once mighty gates!' did he wail.

5 At *this* there was much uproar among the followers. For the Enlightened One had spoken of great riches, of pleasure beyond our imaginings.

6 Our party was much reduced and many had fallen on the way. It was not just the young *or* the infirm that lay rotting in the wasteland that we had traversed, but *also* strong, healthy men.

7 'Weak!' the holy Seer had called them. 'Unworthy of the great Babylon!' he had cried.

8 And so it was that we trekked onward for forty days *and* forty nights, our dying friends and loved ones lying by the roadside unburied and forgotten.

9 'Liar,' someone cried. 'Charlatan,' went another. Muttering *and* whispering could be heard amongst us, and men were reaching for sharpened knives *and* heavy dubs.

CHAPTER 412

BUT a quiet came upon us as the Seer's mount, a mighty wasteland creature of *dire* strength, did issue forth a mighty roar such as one that might level the very mountains and then, when a hush

had descended upon the followers, the Seer did speak.

2 He told us of the miracles, of the great *powers* invested in him by the Mighty One. He told us of his journey into the mountains and his meeting with the Lord himself.

3 It was true and I was shamed, as were many others, that we could have ever doubted the Enlightened One's *great* words.

4 I have made a sketch of the Enlightened One in memory of this great moment and can only hope that the likeness will please him into forgiving me for my transgression.

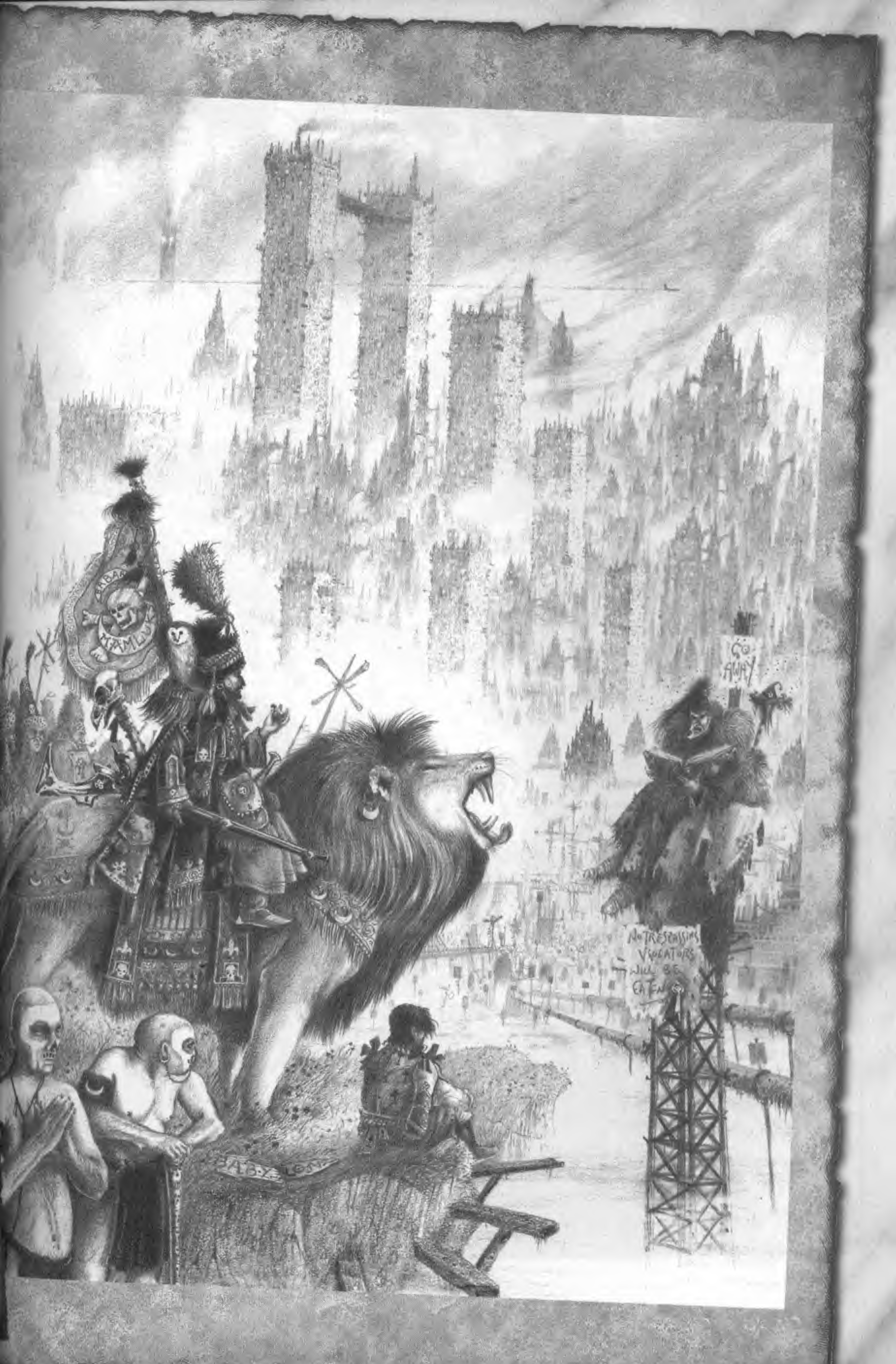
5 As I sit writing *this*, the followers are settling down to sleep, the flickering of camp fire providing us with warmth and comfort. The piteous creature that is sat *upon* the pillar has long since become incoherent, his babblings and insane ravings barely audible.

6 Tomorrow we will be entering the City of Babylon, we will walk between its golden spires and all will be wondrous ever more.

Here endeth the Epistle of Johannes Blanc, prophet and scribe.



| | |
|---|---------------------|
| Exhibit | 264 of 786 |
| Reference | QM11002165.44.6 |
| Recovered | Thakarta 3. |
| Notes | |
| 7234789.M34 | Planet infested by |
| Chaos cultists. | |
| 6264845.M34 | Cleansed by Adeptus |
| Astartes of the Spectral Tiger chapter. | |
| Inscriptor | Cassitus |



OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Seven

COUNTDOWN

0159

OBZIDIAN, A PLANET INFESTED BY CHAOS. A PLANET SCHEDULED FOR DESTRUCTION. A PLANET WITH A DEADLY SECRET.

THE BOMBARDMENT OF OBZIDIAN DRAWS NEAR, ARE ALL THE GROUND FORCES AWAY?

WE HAVE NO CHOICE, THE BOMBARDMENT PLAN IS IN MOTION!

ANY TROOPS LEFT MUST FEND FOR THEMSELVES.

COME TO YOUR DEATHS, WE WELCOME ALL!

WE OFFER THE GIFT OF FREEDOM FROM SERVICE TO THAT TYRANT, THE EMPEROR.

SMALL POCKETS OF BLOOD ANGELS REMAIN. I FEAR YOUR ASSASSINS PERISHED IN THE EXECUTION OF THEIR MISSION.

BOLTER SHELLS ARE MY GIFT TO YOU...

A TASTY SNACK, ANTENOR...

THE TOXIC JUICES OF THIS BODY WILL CONVERT IT INTO NUTRIENTS...

CHIMP!

EMPEROR'S BONES!

AIM FOR THE HEADS. TAKE EACH ONE OUT!

ARE YOU BOTH MAD? WE HAVE NO TIME TO PLAY WITH THIS CREATURE.

WE MUST STOP THE BOMBARDMENT!



NONETHELESS,
A WELL-AIMED
SHOT WILL NOT
BE WASTED!

PHAN-TOR!

KABLAM!

SPLAT!



WELL DONE,
BROTHER TROILUS,
BUT THE NINE
HEADS HAVE
MANY EYES...



SEE!



LIBRARIAN,
LIBRARIAN!

I...CAN...FEEL...
ITS...MIND...



BACK TO THE
SURFACE, NOW!

...IT CALLS
ME...

TROILUS
GO!



TROILUS, TAKE YOUR
OWN COUNCIL, MOVE!



DON'T LEAVE US!
STAY A WHILE!

IT'S MAD!
IT'S GOING
IN THE WRONG
DIRECTION!

KRASH!



LET US PLAY
HIDE AND
SLAY!

ABOMINATIONS!
I WILL DESTROY
YOU!

NO BROTHER,
WE *MUST*
ESCAPE!

BUT IT'S
DEMOLISHED
THE STAIRCASE!





BUT THE DEATHS OF THE MILLIONS OF INNOCENTS IN THE CATACOMBS BELOW WILL ONLY FEED ITS POWER!





The Chaos Beneath

by Mark Brendan

IN THE DANK, subterranean depths of the Marienburg Grand Sewer network, more than effluent was being carried along the crumbling, cavernous conduits. The stark glare of the flaming torches held aloft by four sinister, robed figures projected dancing shadows upon the tortured frame of a man dragged along the waste channel between them.

The captive was clad in fine, black leather britches and riding boots. Above the waist he had been stripped, revealing a gaudy patchwork of lurid bruises and angry red weals where a lash had bitten him, and most disturbing of all a mass of blisters and scabs which traced an unearthly, sinuous pattern where he had recently been branded on his breast. The cluster of sores formed a circular hub, from which a broad point projected from the bottom left quadrant, and a lithe tail twisted away from the top right to form a design as strangely fluid as the flames which had imprinted it onto the victim's flesh. A sack of purple velvet covered the man's head and was securely knotted around his throat, so that he was forced to stumble along, being shoved, kicked and whipped in the correct direction.

Passing beyond the grand arches of the main channel, they entered a little-used part of the system, where the walls once more narrowed about them like the jaws of a great serpent. It was here that they came upon a bizarre little iron bound door and the journey came to its end as the cultist bearing the lash unlocked the portal and the group passed into the dim glow beyond.

The room within was of a comfortable size to accommodate perhaps twenty or more people and had a high, vaulted ceiling. Low swirls of thick, choking incense from braziers situated around the walls carpeted the tiled floor. The central

area of this floor was dominated by a huge mosaic, with a pattern delineated in slivers of coloured glass, marble and shell which bore a strong resemblance to the brand seared on to the prisoner's torso. At the centre of the design, four shackles anchored to the floor by thick steel chains awaited a victim.

On the opposite side of the chamber from the door was a slightly raised platform, upon which stood a large throne of twisted black wood and purple velvet. A tall, feminine silhouette rose from this throne and came down from the platform to stand before the circle. Like the other cultists she wore a long, deep purple robe, but rather than being belted by a simple cord, hers was a thick leather belt with a large, wrought-iron skull for a clasp. Also, there were long vents up to her hips in the sides of the robes, beneath which she wore fine purple velvet trousers and soft, doeskin boots. The tall figure wore her hood down, in contrast to the other disciples, and her face was concealed by an ornate black ballroom mask shaped like a raven. Delicate mother-of-pearl inlay chased around the eye slits of the mask, behind which blazed violet irises, and edged the elegant beak too, whilst a spectacular spray of midnight black feathers held soft golden hair back from her temples.

'Let the offering be brought forward to the circle,' she announced in a clear, cultured voice. At her behest, the four cultists thrust their prisoner forward into the circle and more robed figures hurried forth from the shadows to spread-eagle him in the centre of the mosaic. Only once he was securely shackled to the floor was the bag removed from the prisoner's head. His face bore none of the marks of the torment his body had suffered in the cultists' care, and for the briefest of

instants his clear grey eyes locked upon the dreamy violet orbits of the figure looming over him, before he closed his eyelids in despair and submission. His jaw was clean shaven, and his features lean and predatory, with a suggestion of strong lineage in both his high forehead, with its sweeping collar-length black hair, and in the long, straight line of his nasal bridge.

'Well, well, well,' the woman mocked. 'Obediah Cain. Second Lieutenant of the Church of Sigmar's Holy Inquisition in Marienburg. You are welcome as our very special guest of honour. Indeed, you might even say that we *need* you.'

'Do what you will with me, witch!' groaned the man on the floor. 'Remember that when judgement comes, it is final!'

'It is good that you have given up all notion of redemption, and you are now looking to history for vindication,' the masked woman spat. 'For when M'Loch T'Chort, Weaver of the Ways, High Daemonic Prince of Twisted Destiny and Misguided Fate, comes to seize possession of your miserable skin, the last thing he needs is some lost soul contesting his right to it.'

With that, she delivered a stinging kick to his ribs, causing him to whimper as the scabs on his brand cracked with the force.

'It's such a shame that we have to inflict punishment on your earthly clay before our Lord can take up residence within it, but as you Witch Hunters are always so fond of demonstrating, the prisoner's co-operation isn't adequate grounds to carry on to the next stage of the procedure. You, more than anyone, should appreciate what is required to ensure the veracity of any actions or claims made by a prisoner, because, after all, their co-operation might be a falsehood to avoid torture. Isn't that the option presented to your victims, Witch Hunter?' she asked, bending down so that her face was close to his own pained visage. 'Isn't it, you pious worm?' she howled when he did not answer, and dug the points of her gauntleted fingers into the weeping wound on his chest.

'Yes! Yes it is, damn you!' sobbed the broken man squirming on the floor.

'Very good,' she said evenly, and stood up once more. 'Then let us begin the rite.'

The dozen or so cultists in the room took up positions around the circle and began to sway rhythmically, chanting in alien, melodious tongues an otherworldly mantra of damnation which rose up from the strange vaulted room and out into the still night beyond, inviting a thing which should not be into the realm of living men.

Led on by the strange, powerful sorceress, the cultists' performance became more frenetic, their exhortations more desperate, and a singular change began to take place within the eerily lit room. The heavy clouds of incense drifting languidly at waist height coalesced in the centre of the chamber, above the recumbent Witch Hunter, and then spiralled upwards into a point like some grotesque, ectoplasmic worm rearing its swollen bulk out of the fetid soil. The tip of the apparition dipped towards the unconscious man's face and infiltrated his mouth and nostrils, feeding itself, coil after coil into his twitching, choking body.

The ritual's leader suddenly ceased her rapturous chanting to command, 'It is time. Let the sacrifice be brought forth for the Sanguinary Binding!'

From a curtained alcove in the shadowy chamber, a night-spawned abomination of uncommon vileness shambled into the circle. It was a man in stature but, through constant exposure to the warping malignancy of the Chaos Lord, Tzeentch, his head had puckered and inflated like an over-ripe fruit, the skin thick, wrinkled and lurid pink in hue, his mouth a broad, grinning slash filled with row after row of sharp, blackened fangs and his scalp studded with starfish's suckers in place of hair. His left arm, too, had become severely mutated and was grossly elongated and jointed in four places, covered in tough pink skin like his face, while the hand on the end of the offensive limb had grown to absurd proportions and its eight thick fingers were hollow tubes. In the Daemonic limb he held a struggling lamb, while in his other, human hand he carried a large sacrificial knife. Taking up position over the Witch Hunter, the mutant prepared to complete the ceremony with a blood sacrifice.

Despite everything that Obediah Cain had been through, some spark of his original consciousness yet remained untainted by the invading entity, and the unacceptable presence of a Chaos mutant hovering over him stirred that faint ember into scintillating action. Cain did the only thing he could under the circumstances – he brought his knee up sharply, as far as the chains would permit, into the creature's shin. It was enough to cause the mutant's leg to buckle and deposit him in a heap on top of the Witch Hunter. The sacrificial lamb scurried free and gambolled around the room, adding to the confusion.

When the mutant picked himself up from the Witch Hunter's body, ready to give the prisoner one final taste of pain before the ritual erased his soul forever, pain and shock registered upon his grotesquely leering visage. Others, too, had noticed the unthinkable thing which had befallen their great plan and began gasping and crying out in fear and dismay.

'You fool! What have you done?' shrieked the sorceress.

The mutant backed away, shaking his bloated head, his eyes never leaving the terrible sight in the centre of the circle. The sacrificial knife jutted from beneath the chin of their prisoner – but worse than that an ephemeral glow was intensifying within Cain's open mouth and his cheeks were beginning to bulge with warp-born energies. Then the coruscating wash of power seemed to contract in upon itself.

The cultists eyed one another with deep trepidation. The mutant continued to back off, still shaking his head in pained denial.

Suddenly a brilliant, prismatic cascade of light erupted from the corpse's hideously stretched mouth, an otherworldly illumination which seemed to siphon the flesh from the cultists' bodies where it touched them, drawing out their substance in little lumps which evaporated within the searing beams. In the space of a minute, the screaming and pleading was done. A dozen charred skeletons clattered to the stone floor.

Obediah Cain's body writhed and jerked with unholy vigour, then sat bolt upright tearing the steel bonds from their fittings

as though they were a child's paper chains. With an impatient gesture he yanked the knife from his throat and cast it aside. After a deep, gurgling cough, he clamped a hand over the hole in his voice box and uttered in a horrible, reedy, burbling timbre, 'Nec-ro-mancer! I must find a Necromancer!'



'I'M SORRY, de la Lune, but after careful consideration the Guild's senior tutors have concluded that you are simply not possessed of the finer skills of meditation and concentration required to make the grade as a qualified Wizard in this academy.'

Michael de la Lune perched on the edge of a comfortable leather chair in the opulent office of Paracelsus van der Groot, the Marienburg College of Magic's Master of Apprentices. Across the magnificent teak table, strewn with arcane trinkets and scrolls, van der Groot was telling him the awful, unbearable news that he had failed his apprenticeship. De la Lune was a slight man, who had witnessed the passing of no more than twenty summers, and his boyish, Bretonnian face wore an expression of crestfallen astonishment. A lock of dark, wavy hair fell across his forehead as he hung his head in defeat.

'But don't take on so, lad,' continued the corpulent van der Groot, toying with one of his enormous rings in embarrassment, 'There are plenty of careers wanting for resourceful, educated fellows like yourself. Have you considered perhaps something in one of the mercantile professions – they're always looking for accountants and administrators. Or if you still want to work with magic, how about the Alchemists' Guild? I know a few people there and everything they do is academic. Not quite so esoteric as our stuff, eh?

'I could get in touch with...'

Against all the protocols, the young man dared to interrupt one of the masters and spoke for the first time since entering the

office. 'Please sir? By your leave, I think I'd just like to collect my belongings and be gone.'

'Yes, yes. I understand lad,' van der Groot said breezily. 'I know it's a sore blow to you young ones to be told that you've failed, but only a few ever succeed. There's no shame in it, so you stay in touch and—'

There was the sound of the door shutting.

Michael strode down the tangled web of corridors which burrowed through the great edifice that was the Marienburg College of Magic. He kept his head down on the way to his private quarters, ignoring the greetings of other wizards of his acquaintance along the route. His head was a whirl of confusion and resentment. What had he done to fail the test? He had thought this establishment to be an enlightened one. After all, hadn't they offered him a second chance after he had failed the entrance exam to the exalted Altdorf college. Though he had long suspected that entrance to Altdorf's College had more to do with money than ability, and he reasoned that his Bretonnian lineage being of freeman stock, rather than the aristocracy who more usually gained admittance there, was the real reason that he failed the exam. However, he couldn't understand why the establishment which had eventually permitted him entry to the field of his beloved magical research would now turn their backs on him. Their reasoning seemed to be beyond him.

Michael reached his spartan quarters and began packing such meagre possessions as he owned into the sling bag which had accompanied him from his home city of Lyonesse four years earlier. What would become of him now? It was a bitter irony that he had travelled so far, learning two new languages in his pursuit of magical expertise and the Classical script employed in conjuration, just to seemingly have to return to Bretonnia with nothing to show for it but a couple of apprentices' parlour tricks. Oh, he might stay in Marienburg as van der Groot had suggested, but that would be taking an almighty risk with his dwindling funds. If

he couldn't find some way to sustain himself here then he might end up a beggar or worse, and he was in no mood for taking chances at present. It would be much more sensible, he reasoned, to use what money he had left to buy passage back to his homeland whereupon he could take up employment in his father's textile trade, much though the idea pained him. On the face of things, however, he didn't see any other reasonable options open to him.

'Damn it! Everything is a mess. Damn Magic and damn merchants too!' he muttered, swinging the heavy satchel over his shoulder. With that, he left the little room he had inhabited for the past four years for the final time and headed out of the building.



BLINKING OWLISHLY in the light of day, Michael passed beyond the portals and out into Guilderstraase, pausing briefly to hand his room keys over to the gatekeeper. Eyes which burned with intent unknown marked him as he proceeded down the broad thoroughfare, then a dark figure hurried from the alley whence it had observed him so that it might intercept the youth before he passed from sight.

Michael was still in a condition of shock, his thoughts lost in fanciful notions of how he would spend the rest of his life, when a hand clapped down heavily upon his shoulder. Michael almost leapt clean out of his skin at the sudden contact and whirled to face whoever it was that presumed to be so familiar.

It was a tall man, garbed in the traditional attire of the religious puritans who made the vanquishing of heretics their lives' work: wide-brimmed hat, leather britches and high riding boots, a half cloak worn over a blouson shirt, and a burnished steel gorget to protect his neck from Vampires. At his belt he wore a long, heavy bladed sabre and a fine duelling pistol, along with pouches for powder and shot.

'Forgive me,' wheezed the stranger in a voice curiously thin and consumptive for one so impressive of stature. 'It was not my intention to startle you.'

A Witch Hunter! Michael's heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. Just when he thought things could get no worse, along came the practitioner of Wizardry's worst nightmare. These religious zealots were notoriously indiscriminate in their inquisitions, and many an innocent whose only crime was an interest in sorcery had suffered torture and death under their regime. It would be a bitter irony indeed if he were to get into trouble for practising magic now of all times, and he briefly wondered if the gods were having sport with him.

'What can I do for you?' asked the young man guardedly.

'Please. You have nothing to fear from me,' continued the Witch Hunter in his unhealthy tone of voice, 'My name is Obediah Cain. Would I be correct in assuming that you have come from the College of Magic?'

'Well, yes, but I won't be going back there. My apprenticeship came to an end today, and I shan't be going on to indoctrination in the higher mysteries.'

'Ah. I am sorry to hear that,' answered the man, his eyebrow and the corner of his mouth raising a little in unison. 'Despite that, I should still very much like to talk with you concerning your days at the College. If you can spare me the time over a drink that is?'

'Alas, it seems that I have all the time in the world now, and a drink would be most welcome at this juncture.'



THE TULIP WAS a ribald establishment in a side street off Guilderstraase, patronised mainly by labourers and menial workers. Cain had suggested it so that they were not likely to encounter any of Michael's erstwhile colleagues, and any reservations the youth had about entering such a bawdy house in his academian attire were dispelled when he saw how the

presence of the Witch Hunter discouraged the clientele from even a cursory glance in their direction.

Cain himself refused to drink with Michael, proclaiming that his religious ascetism would not permit him to partake of alcohol, but he generously provided the youth with a jug of foaming table beer from which he could refill his tankard.

'So what's this all about then?' enquired Michael once he had properly introduced himself to the sinister Witch Hunter. He was eager, he realised, to get this encounter over with, since he instinctively mistrusted this strange man. But at the same time a resentment for the world of magic and wizards which had so cruelly rejected him was beginning to fester in the undertow of his shattered emotions – a resentment which was stirring up faint notions of respect for the work of such men as Cain, even as he spoke.

'As you can imagine, where I am involved it is about heresy, blasphemy and cult activity!' smiled Obediah Cain.

'You surely can't think that I–' blurted Michael, but he was silenced by an impatient wave from the Witch Hunter.

'No, no, no, lad! Of course I don't think a failed apprentice is involved. But answer me this: why do you think capable young men like yourself fail at that academy all the time?'

'Well, I mean, the course is very rigorous, isn't it? It takes a high degree of spiritual fortitude as well as academic prowess. They told me that only rare individuals are cut out for such a challenge,' Michael answered carefully, not yet prepared to damn his erstwhile colleagues, but somewhere deep inside he was starting to entertain the notion that damnation was perhaps their lot.

'Ha!' Cain spat. 'And do you suppose that all those bloated old men up at the College are possessed of such purity? Don't you believe it, lad! Why, you can reckon the sins of the flesh on their fat carcasses like the bites on that serving wench's neck. They haven't the moral fibre to do what they ask of you young apprentices who fail, but they'll happily take your money. No, the easy route to arcane power is the path trodden by their

well-shod soles, and that means bargains with Daemonic powers. Dark magic and necromancy, pacts with Chaos Daemons is their mystical currency, you mark my words.

'Now listen well, young Michael de la Lune. I have it, from an unimpeachable source, that there are ancient books of necromancy, and the unguents used in the mummification rituals of distant Araby, in the College libraries.'

'No, it's surely impossible,' Michael gasped, shaking his head to clear the ale fumes, aghast at the enormity of what he was hearing. 'I spent four years in that place. I would have known.'

'Do you think that such a well-established secret society would reveal itself to a mere apprentice? Even one under their own roof? Now I'm not saying that everyone at the College who isn't an apprentice is in on this. That would be madness.' Cain smiled enigmatically. 'But certainly the top echelon of the Guild are guilty of the vilest crimes against the Church. I'm appealing to you now to perform a deed that could save countless souls. You're the only one who can do it Michael. I can't go in there, so I want you to go and steal the books and the oils and give us solid evidence to bring these blackguards to trial.'

It all seemed to make sense to Michael in some awful, surreal sort of way. He prayed earnestly that the Witch Hunter with the strange voice was labouring under a gross misapprehension, but now that those things had been said, he knew he had to find out whether it was true for his own peace of mind. He had spent such a large part of his life within those walls, under the tutelage of those implicated, that he must discover the truth. And if the truth should prove as the Witch Hunter would have it? Then damn all practitioners of magic! He would name every last one of them to clear the taint of their sorcery from his soul. He must keep reminding himself that he was no longer a wizard, and the only thing of any consequence now was the pursuit of truth. He had been lied to for long enough; although Michael knew not what was to become of him in the years to come, he determined that honesty would characterise it.

'How will I know?' Michael asked quietly, 'You said yourself that such a society, if it exists, has kept its secrets well hidden.'

Cain smirked triumphantly and reached down inside his boot.

'I have a map.'



MICHAEL EMERGED from his hiding place in one of the smaller, and lesser-used libraries of the Marienburg College of Magic. It was a strange twist of circumstance indeed which had caused him to return to this building the very next day after he had been evicted from it.

Obediah Cain had remained with Michael during the previous day, and had provided for the youth's comfort generously, paying from his own purse for both their lodgings. The next morning Cain had instructed him on using the map and drilled him thoroughly on the need for secrecy in the mission he was about to perform for the good of the Old World. Cain had also provided him with a curious little serpentine charm of blackest obsidian, hung upon a pendant of brass. The Witch Hunter assured him that the talisman would negate the power of any wards he might encounter in liberating the evidence he sought, but also warned him that whilst wearing it he should be quite unable to use any of his own magical powers, such as they were.

As to what pretences Michael would employ to gain access to the College, Cain left him to his own devices. So Michael had simply used Paracelsus van der Groot's invitation to keep in touch in order to convince the gatekeeper to permit him access.

Following the spidery lines traced upon the parchment map, the young man crept stealthily through the familiar halls. Although it was late at night, he knew there would still be many powerful Wizards awake within these ancient walls.

After a fraught journey, he eventually arrived at the location of his quest. The

Library of Forbidden Mysteries was on a floor which had always been deemed off-limits to apprentices and it was a part of the building he had never before visited, since he was an obedient student. Although the room was unlocked, various magical alarms and warding devices existed to discourage the excessively curious. Those who had tried in the past to gain unwarranted access to this place had paid the price of their folly by expulsion from the academy, or worse in some cases.

The atmosphere within was one of timeless serenity, and thus far the power of the Witch Hunter's talisman seemed to be holding out. Most of the dusty volumes on the creaking shelves seemed to be historical texts warning of the dark side of magic, texts which chronicled and cautioned the unwary against the machinations of Chaos and evil rather than actually instructed one in the Dark Ways. Nevertheless, even the knowledge that such practices existed at all was deemed too unsafe to reveal to impressionable apprentices.

According to the parchment given to him by Cain, the things he sought were in a safe behind the large portrait of the rather stern-looking founder of the College, Zun Mandragore, that hung upon the back wall. Perspiration pricked Michael's forehead as he tremulously reached his hand out to the heavy frame of the picture. Gently sliding the portrait to one side the map proved true, for sure enough a bulky steel safe was embedded in the wall.

But before he could react, a previously invisible rune on the metal safe door blazed with arcane power. There was no time to react: a brilliant bolt of cerulean lightning arced from the rune at his hand... only to fizzle into harmless ozone an instant before he betrayed himself with a scream. Gingerly Michael shook his head as the coppery tang of blood wet his tongue where he had bitten his lip in alarm, and then resumed his task with vigour, desiring only to be free of this oppressive place. The world of Magic had turned upon him so quickly and profoundly now that he no longer experienced wonder and awe in its presence, just fear and revulsion.

Feverishly Michael dialled the combination provided with the parchment, vague questions about how such a map had come into existence subsumed by his excitement. The door swung open without a sound. Before him lay an enormous volume, bound in what seemed to be very soft, thin leather, entitled *Liber Nagash vol. III*, together with six stoppered vials of brackish liquid. He quickly stuffed the contents of the safe into his satchel and fled the room.



‘**B**OUND IN THE skin flayed from the backs of living men,’ Obediah Cain breathed almost reverentially. A small table set before him in their small upstairs room in the Tulip inn was dominated by the hulking tome. It was a Classical translation, the Witch Hunter had been explaining, of one of the original nine treatises on necromancy penned by the Supreme Lord of the Living Dead, Nagash of Nagashizzar himself. ‘And here too, the sacred preserving fluids of the ancient Tomb Kings,’ continued Cain in a sort of distant rapture. ‘Natron, imbued with the dust of cadavers, to bind a spirit to empty, dead flesh, and protect the carnal vessel from the ravages of time.’

‘However, I grow weary now, young Michael, and I must rest. Know that there is yet one more thing I would ask of you on the morrow before you shall be properly compensated for your service. A dangerous thing in which we both must share but, before all that, I would urge you to read..., here for example...’ A slender finger tapped the dry parchment page. ‘The binding ritual used to create mummified undead creatures such as the Tomb Kings themselves. Read this and drink deeply of the corruption and easy power with which your former tutors dabble. Fore-warned is, after all, fore-armed.’

With that, Cain swung his legs up onto his bunk and passed immediately into such a deep stupor that it almost seemed

to Michael that he was not breathing at all.

It seemed odd to Michael, who in his own estimation might be a touch naive but certainly wasn't gullible, that this champion of holiness, this supposed paladin of temperance, should encourage him, a young disgruntled practitioner of Magic denied the way to naturally progress his art, to read forbidden texts. As far as Michael knew, one could be burned at the stake for simply having *seen* such a work as *Liber Nagash*, never mind actually having read it. The young man suddenly grew very suspicious and deeply afraid of his strange new mentor.

However, he determined to read the extract, as Cain had decreed, in order to perhaps gain a clue as to what was going on, but no more. He would have to play along for the time being, until he found out what Cain's game was and then act in whatever small way he could. He was scared, but a sudden determination not to mess this up, as he had done the rest of his life, steeled him and prevented him from bolting from the room that instant and catching the first stagecoach to Bretonnia. Eyes darting sideways, as if he dared not read the words he was even now taking in, Michael began to read.



IF ANYTHING, despite his long rest, the Witch Hunter seemed even wearier the next day. Michael himself didn't exactly feel in the peak of condition himself, and noted the deep black rings under his own eyes whilst shaving his downy chin in the tiny silver mirror he carried. It was afternoon, Michael having spent most of the night poring over the crumbling pages of *Liber Nagash*'s mummification ritual. Abhorrent lore permeated his mind, but unlike weaker men, Michael had no desire to exploit this easy power, which he knew would only lead to self-serving evil. Nevertheless, a part of his innocence had gone forever with the knowledge that vast earthly gain could be bought for the meagre price of one's soul. His optimistic idealism, already damaged by rejection

from the College, was further undermined with the realisation that in these dark times there would be no shortage of desperate people prepared to pay such a price. Somewhere deep within his soul, a vow to set this bitter world of greed and opportunism to rights was starting to take shape.

For his Daemonic part, M'Loch T'Chort could feel the hold he had over Cain's body growing weaker by the hour. He knew that he did not have much time left to salvage his diabolic plot. He was pleased to note the taint of horror on the boy, and could sense a nascent treachery flowering in him. Although the Daemon Prince could not read the minds of men, he was possessed of certain intuitions for the darkness in their hearts, and he felt assured that Michael's corruption was now advanced enough to offer the young man a Daemonic bargain. Until that time came, he must conserve his energy.

Michael found the Witch Hunter to be uncommunicative for the remainder of the day, and noted how he had never once seen the man eat or drink anything. When Michael suggested they dine, Cain grunted non-committally and tossed a few coppers in the youngster's direction, but did not stir from his bunk when Michael left the room and descended the stairs to the bar alone.



WHEN THE evening finally drew around, the Witch Hunter was suddenly galvanised into action. The cadaverous figure rushed around, collecting up his belongings and instructing Michael to bring the oils and the book. Michael hurried to comply, fear of Cain and curiosity about his intent blending in equal measure to bring about his obedience. The Witch Hunter was obviously in a hurry to be away from the Tulip, and Michael almost had to run in order to keep pace as Cain strode out of the premises.

'Where are we going now?' Michael enquired guardedly as they left the inn.

Cain smiled in a paternal way. 'To the sewers, lad. There is to be a ritual this very night and I need you with me.'

'Why don't you just inform the authorities and let them deal with it? It sounds terribly dangerous.'

'Ah,' said Cain with a snort, 'we prefer to work independently of such institutions, and I want you to positively identify the participants. We'll observe quietly and bring them to trial later, so I can guarantee your safety.'

This explanation rang false to Michael but, with no one else to turn to, he knew he had to rely on his own resources to get to the bottom of this mystery. So it came to pass that he found himself scurrying along behind the bobbing lantern of the Witch Hunter on the slippery walkways of Marienburg's sewer network. They had entered through a disguised door in the cellar of a silent, shuttered town house. Before descending, Cain had slipped away for a moment before returning bearing long robes of purple velvet. They were a disguise, Cain explained, that would allow them to get close to the ritual.

After slogging through the foul, dank underground for what seemed like hours, eventually they came to the threshold over which, only scant days before, the cultists had dragged the tortured body of the Second Lieutenant of the Church of Sigmar's Holy Inquisition. M'Loch T'Chort, struggling to maintain a grip on the dead body of Cain, went about the room, igniting flambeaux held in sconces to illuminate the scene for a plainly shocked Michael.

Grey traces of ash delineated the skeletons of those whom the Daemon Prince had consumed in panic, in order to fuel the strength he had needed to hold on to the rapidly expiring body of the Witch Hunter. In one corner of the chamber, a lamb stood tethered, contentedly munching on a bale of hay. M'Loch T'Chort had clearly made some preparations for his salvation before ascending to the surface of Marienburg.

'What— what is going on?' Michael asked slowly.

'You are,' hissed the Witch Hunter. 'To better things!' He leapt up to the throne

and snatched up a parchment.

'You see this?' he continued in a wild voice. 'This is a contract I have prepared for the one who would solve my dilemma. This contract holds the keys to the greatest magical mysteries of the age! Its clauses have been set down in the name of the unchallenged master of magic, Lord Tzeentch himself! Aid me now and sorceries beyond your wildest imaginations shall be yours to command, if you but dedicate yourself to the service of the Changer of the Ways!'

Michael stood open mouthed in astonishment. He had expected some sort of elaborate con trick, but nothing of this magnitude. 'So you're not a real Witch Hunter then?' was the best he could manage in that frozen moment.

Ignoring the young man, Cain's face become deadly serious and his hand grasped the hilt of his sabre. 'I am the High Daemon Prince of Twisted Fate and Misguided Destiny, from the nethermost planes of the Void!' he hissed. 'Do you accept these terms?'

Michael's mind raced. He was terrified, but also strangely thrilled. Temptation was before him, or death. What would he do?

'I, I accept,' he announced, struggling to keep a level tone of voice. 'What is your dilemma?'

'Excellent!' Cain wheezed. 'I will talk plainly. I am a spirit from beyond this world, and the body I have acquired is dead. It cannot be brought back to life, and I do not have the energy to sustain it much longer. However, the Necromantic process of mummification will preserve the corpse and allow a spirit to control it. I believe you are now familiar with that ritual.'

'I want you to carry out such a ritual and then spill the lamb's blood over me, a requirement I have as a Daemon to indefinitely exist upon this realm, for reasons too complex to explain to you just yet. I will now prepare.'

Cain hastily stripped off his clothes and lay in the circle on the floor. Michael saw now the hideous wound that was the source of the Witch Hunter's speech impediment, and no doubt the demise of the real Obediah Cain. He wondered briefly how the great man had come to

such a tragic end, then falteringly began the rite. He poured the natron potion over the body before him in the prescribed fashion, enunciating the words from the pages of *Liber Nagash*, using the vocal techniques he learned at the College to craft the phrases into vibrations of mystical power.

Within moments, dark energy gathered in the room, its easy, exhilarating flow threatening to consume the boy with more and greater secrets yet. There was the scent of lightning in the air, and death.

When he completed the mummification process, Michael untethered the lamb and fetched it across to the ritual circle. Then, taking a deep breath, he reached down for the sacrificial knife. Now would come the part of the ritual which completed the binding.

However, instead of picking up the dagger, at the very last moment Michael swept up the Witch Hunter's sabre instead. Its wicked steel blade incised the still, dark air with a hissing silver arc as it plunged towards the form on the floor. For the second time in its short existence, the lamb had a narrow escape and skipped away unharmed as Obediah Cain's blood poured out onto the mosaic. There was no redemption for the Daemon Prince this time. The ex-apprentice had totally severed Cain's head. The glassy eyes blinked once in astonishment before expiring forever.

'Never underestimate humans, Daemon filth!' Michael gasped, still clutching the sword in both hands, his whole body heaving in uncontrollable spasms.

M'Loch T'Chort's grasp upon the Earthly Plane had not totally loosened yet, however. Tendrils of vapour began to emanate from the corpse's neck, rapidly ballooning into a twisted, ropy tentacle. Behind the tentacle a burgeoning cloud of foul gases pumped out of the awful, headless body. As it formed, howling, enraged mouths manifested across its horrendous surface. It was a dank, nebulous obscenity which writhed and billowed before Michael's panic-stricken eyes with an oozing, hypnotic plasticity.

It reared up before the young man as a towering column of smoking, stinking Chaos, its absolute horror profoundly

changing his outlook on the world forever, and turning his luxuriant black locks snow white in the passing of but an instant in its unholy presence.

'Innn-ssect!' sputtered the ephemeral nightmare. 'I sshaall crussshh you!'

And then the most intolerable of all the violations of nature, beyond anything Michael ever dreamt possible, unfolded before him. For the headless body of Cain rose jerkily to its feet. It groped towards him, the dank cloud of Daemonic essence dancing above it, whispering its vengeance in grossly distorted tongues. It was all too much and Michael turned and fled for the door, sick with the knowledge that humanity could never stand against abomination of this magnitude.

Before he could make good his escape, though, M'Loch T'Chort reached out purposefully with Cain's hand, making a curious sign with the fingers, and the door slammed shut with such force that the brickwork of its frame cracked from the impact.

'Now, boy!' wheezed the Daemon. 'I will flay the meat from your bones and eat your very soul!'

In panic, Michael shrunk against the wall, trying to steel himself for the inevitable end and turned his eyes away. White hot light burst all around him. Michael was shocked rigid and, blinking his eyes seconds later, he wondered if he was in the Halls of Morr.

But no, he was still in the chamber and had somehow survived the Daemon's magical assault. Not three paces from him, he saw to his horror, the last wisps of M'Loch T'Chort slithered free from Cain's ruined neck and the Witch Hunter's corpse slumped, almost gratefully it seemed, to the ground.

The Daemon was yet abroad, though, hovering like a wrathful thunderhead of pure magical essence in the centre of the room, swelling rapidly as hatred and rage fuelled its murderous purpose. Knowing that it had to be the end for him this time, Michael's mind, which had been feverishly calculating ways to survive this ordeal quite simply overloaded, and pure instinct took over. Rolling himself into a tight ball on the floor, he unconsciously clutched

the amulet at his neck and prayed over and over to Sigmar as the hell-begotten Daemon cloud washed over him. There was an awful, agonised wailing like the lament of a legion of tortured spirits... then nothing.

After a moment, Michael risked opening his eyes again, just in time to watch the last flickering trails of M'Loch T'Chort's magical form disappearing between his fingers, into the curious little obsidian talisman he wore at his throat – the very talisman that the fiend had given him.



'SO THAT WAS a Daemon,' Michael said to himself. He looked thoughtfully at the remains of Cain, who had given his life in the battle against

these plagues and vexations of decent folk, and reached for the sword with which the Witch Hunter had set out to right such wrongs. Hefting the sabre and picking up the pistol from the floor, he gauged the weight of them both. They felt good. He had carried on Cain's good work, ensuring that the heretic-slayer's death had not been in vain.

It had been the first thing he had done right in his entire life, he reflected

'Truth? Inquisition? Balance?' he muttered, donning the wide-brimmed hat that Obediah Cain would definitely be needing no longer, and scooping up the other belongings of the late Witch Hunter.

'Work to be done,' Michael de la Lune, one-time apprentice sorcerer, said in a stronger, more determined voice as he left behind the carnage of the small cultist's chamber. As he strode through the sewers, a strange gleam shone in his eye and he clutched the Witch Hunter's sabre in his white-knuckled fist. ●

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LAST MAN STANDING

WRITTEN by DAN ABNETT
DRAWN by MIKE PERKINS
LETTERED by KID ROBSON

"MY NAME IS
FERON.

"SPACE MARINE
SCOLT, IMPERIAL
FISTS CHAPTER.

"THE OLD CHARTS
CALL THIS PLANET
KOLKUN.



"HERE, IN THE PLUMICE
OCEANS OF THE SOUTHERN
HEMISPHERE, THE FISTS
HAVE SPENT SIX MONTHS
HOLDING THE LINE AGAINST
AN ENEMY INCURSION.

"IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS CARNAGE,
I AM A FLEETING SHADOW, WHO
OBSERVES AND LEARNS AND INFORMS.

"THAT IS MY ALLOTTED ROLE."

"MY MISSION TODAY, TO SURVEY
THE ORK GUNNERY POSITIONS
ALONG THE WESTERN EDGE OF
THE TARKOOM FLATS.

"TOMORROW, A MAJOR OFFEN-
SIVE WILL LIVE OR DIE ON THE
ACCURACY OF MY DATA-GATHER-
ING. I—

"SOMETHING FLICKERS,
FLASHES, BURNS...



"THE SKY LIGHTS UP, TWO
MILES TO THE EAST, SOME
GREAT DRAMA IS PLAYED OUT.



"I HEAR BOLTERS COUGHING,
CHAINSWORDS SHRIEKING.

"COMM-LINK TRAFFIC
ERUPTS. FAST-CLIT
STACCATO EXCHANGES
ON THE ENCRYPTED
BEAM.

"IT'S A SQUAD OF
FISTS. PINNED
DOWN. DYING.



"GLORY WALK WITH
YOU, BROTHERS.



"WHAT HELP I CAN OFFER IS YOURS.

"WEAPONS TO STANDBY. MOVE OUT.

"GET A FIX! GET A FIX!"



"THERE...A SOLID RETURN!"

"BLOOD OF THE EMPEROR,
THEY'RE BEING SLAUGHTERED!
LIFE SIGNALS ARE DISAPPEARING
FROM MY TRACER AS I WATCH!"



"IF I CAN ONLY—"



"HELL'S TEETH!"

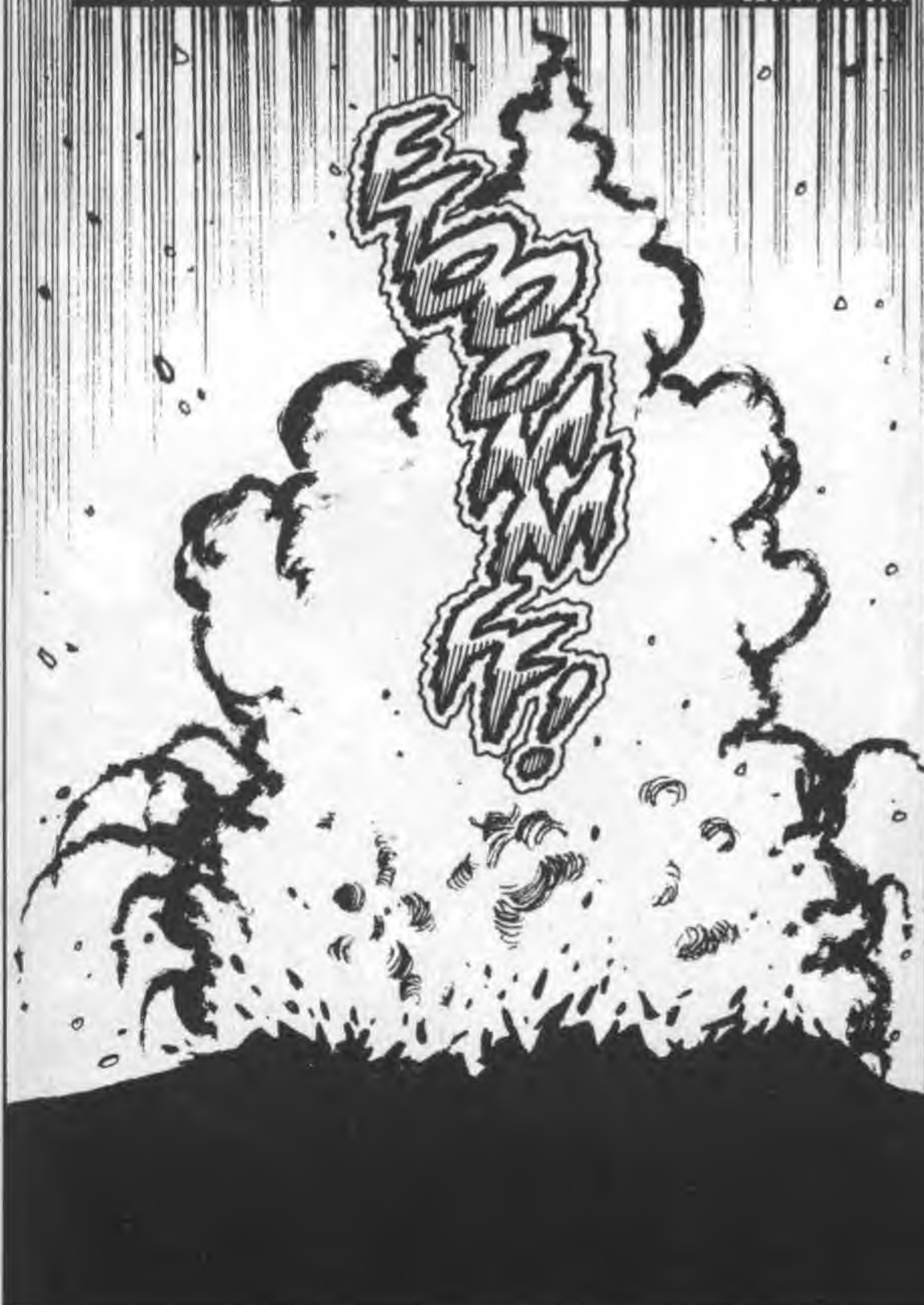
"I'M SUDDENLY FAR TOO
AWARE THAT I'M JUST A
SOLO SCOUT, STRAYING
BLINDLY FROM HIS ASSIGNED
AREA, RUNNING INTO
THE JAWS OF DEATH."



"STILL...I THUMB OFF THE
SAFETY ON MY INFERNUS S..."

"...AND I LET DEATH
KNOW I'M HERE!"





"MY SERGEANT ALWAYS SAID THE SIMPLE IDEAS ARE THE BEST."

"EIGHT FRAG GRENADES TIED TO A TRIP-LINE, BURIED IN THE DUST. CURIOSITY DOES THE REST."

"COMM-TRAFFIC BLURTS AGAIN—"

ALL FIELD UNITS WITHDRAW FROM GRID
NINE NINETY EIGHT. OPPOSITION TOO
INTENSE. LOSSES GREAT, REPEAT...

"NO!"



"THERE'S STILL ONE LIFE SIGNAL LEFT. WEAK,
BUT THERE. THEY'VE GOT A PRISONER."

"SIGNAL IDENT SHOWS IT TO BE THE APOTH-
ECARY. I'D NOT WISH TO LEAVE ANY MAN
BEHIND, BUT OF THEM ALL, HE IS THE
MOST PRECIOUS..."



"EVEN IF IT MEANS WALKING ON
INTO THOSE JAWS OF DEATH."





"ALMOST THERE...SIGNAL
STILL CLEAN..."



"...KEEP MOVING LOW...
WEAPON READY..."

"...SIGNAL NOW SHOWING
JUST AHEAD..."



"...OVER THE
NEXT RISE..."

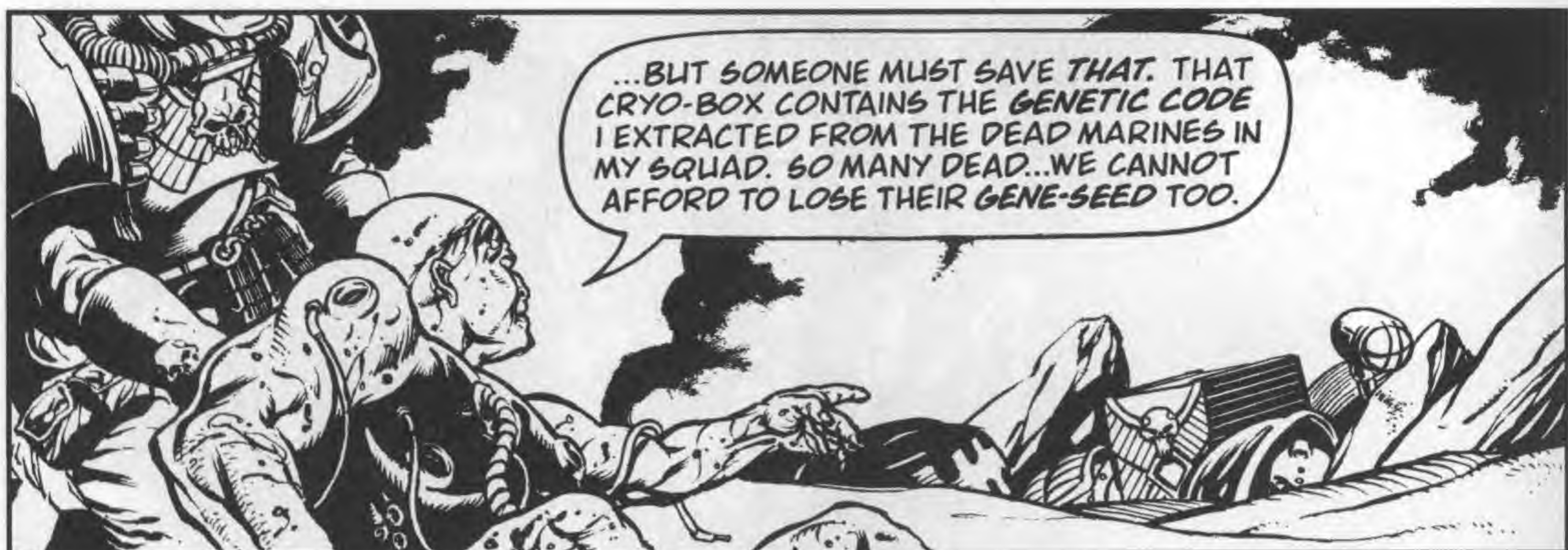


"...THERE!"

"IN THE NAME OF
THE EMPEROR!"







...BUT SOMEONE MUST SAVE THAT. THAT CRYO-BOX CONTAINS THE GENETIC CODE I EXTRACTED FROM THE DEAD MARINES IN MY SQUAD. SO MANY DEAD...WE CANNOT AFFORD TO LOSE THEIR GENE-SEED TOO.



TAKE MY BIKE. YOU WILL NEED ITS SPEED.

DO NOT FAIL.

I WILL NOT.



ONE LAST FAVOUR...



YOU DON'T HAVE TO ASK.

FLAMM!



"THEY'LL BE ON TO ME IN A MOMENT."

"THE PERIMETER DEFENDERS I SNEAKED THROUGH WILL TURN, HOUNDING ME."



"UNLESS I HAPPENED TO HAVE BOOBY TRAPPED THE ORK CAMP WITH ALL THE EXPLOSIVE I COULD SALVAGE.



"I MAY NOT YET HAVE THE GLORIOUS POWER OF A FULL SPACE MARINE, BUT LET NO MAN DOUBT MY RESOLVE OR MY METTLE.

"WHAT I DO NOW...AND IN THE FUTURE... I DO FOR THE IMPERIAL FISTS, IN THE NAME OF THE EMPEROR.

"GLORY WALK WITH US ALL, BROTHERS."



END

• ROLL OF



HONOUR •

MORE OF THE WORTHY HEROES WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ISSUE OF *INFERNO!*

KENSON

LOW – 29, short, youthful appearance, GSOH, n/s. Enjoys films, Chinese food. Seeks girl, similar for long/short term relationship. Send letter and photo to PO Box... Oops! Sorry, wrong mag. Kenson lives and works in London where he almost makes a living from art and design commissions. All this arty stuff helps maintain his downtrodden artistic lifestyle; however, paying the rent necessitates he also does the



occasional 9-5 work. This at least gets him out of the house where he can receive the healthy effects of the sun. (He only seems to be able to paint after sundown, by the regular glare of artificial light.) He was inspired to write to *Inferno!* with some samples of his work after seeing Kev Walker's cover for Issue 1 and is quite chuffed to be now listed here among such distinguished company. (And yes, that is the photo Kenson sent in! – Ed.)

BARRINGTON

J. BAYLEY has been known for many years as a writer of science fiction stories and wonderfully entertaining novels such as *The Soul of the Robot* and *The Zen Gun*. His story 'The Magician's Son' appeared in *White Dwarf* magazine.

JOHN

BLANCHE's fabulous artwork has been a driving force in all Games Workshop games for two decades, but he began his career as a 'typical Sixties art school hippie'. After a spell producing work for the likes of Roger Dean's company and *The Tolkien*



Bestiary, he found himself illustrating the first British editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Warhammer*. These days he devotes his time to further developing the unique gothic imagery of *Warhammer* and *Warhammer 40,000*, as well as contributing many powerful illustrations to the games themselves, such as his cracking cover to the *Sisters of Battle* army book.

MARK

BRENDAN was immersed in his 'Bumper Book of Black Magic' from an early age, and nowadays Brendan's writings are considered by many to be 'a shame, and a caution, and an eldritch horror'. Surfing the currents of madness generated by such luminaries as H.P. Lovecraft, Robert Anton Wilson and Franz Kafka, he hangs ten across a great big ocean of bizarreness, spewing forth reams of wordy gibberish. He is also known to possess a t-shirt with a

picture of Aleister Crowley on it and a message reading 'Shall be the whole of the Law. Do what thou Wilt' if worn back to front. Spooky.



MIKE

PERKINS is a young comic artist from Wolverhampton. As well as published work for 2000AD, Marvel, DC and now Games Workshop, Mike Perkins has also produced a plethora of pictorially panelled comic strips for *Caliber*, including *Black Mist* and *Necroscope*. A new strip, 'Flesh and Blood', will be appearing in *Warhammer Monthly*. Incidentally, Mike would like to take this opportunity to thank Drew and Pierce in the Wolverhampton branch of Games Workshop for their 'Knowledge for Photocopy' initiative!

JOIN THE CREW!

If you would like to contribute, get in touch. We're looking for short stories, comic art and single-page portraits, all in the familiar action-stuffed *Inferno!* style. Write to the address on page 2 and ask for a copy of our Writer's or Artist's Guidelines.

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INFERNO!™

A Company of Wolves by Dan Abnett

With a nod, Ganz led off and the White Wolves moved two abreast through the trees in the direction of the smoke. The clearing was wide and open: trees had been felled for it and now the wood was being burnt on a stone slab set before a crude statue. Five shambling, hairy forms were worshipping at the fire. The White Wolves broke into a gallop, tearing down the slope and into the clearing itself, exploding water from the marshy ground with their hooves. The beastmen at the shrine looked around in horror, baying and breaking for cover.

Children of the Emperor by Barrington J. Bayley

Hoarse screams and the screech of tortured hot metal filled the air. Massive laser blasts were punching into the spaceship. They superheated the air that men breathed, set fire to everything that could hum and sent fireballs exploding through the crowded passageways. Imperial Guardsman Floscan Hartoum found himself in a crowd of jostling, panicking men. Suddenly a great howl of collective terror rose up. Down the corridor a glowing, writhing red mass had appeared, rolling down the passageway towards them. Like the others, Floscan turned and ran.

The Chaos Beneath by Mark Brendan

'You see this?' the witch hunter, Obediah Cain, said in a wild voice, brandishing a parchment. 'This contract holds the keys to the greatest magical mysteries of the age. Its clauses have been set down in the name of the unchallenged master of magic, Lord Tzeentch himself. Aid me now and sorceries beyond your wildest imaginations shall be yours to command, if you but dedicate yourself to the service of the Changer of the Ways!'

Michael stood open-mouthed. 'So you're not a real witch hunter then?' he said.

Last Man Standing by Dan Abnett & Mike Perkins

'My name is Feron. Space Marine Scout, Imperial Fists chapter. The old charts call this planet Kolkun. Here, in the pumice oceans of the southern hemisphere, the Fists have spent six months holding the line against an enemy incursion. In the middle of this carnage, I am a fleeting shadow, who observes and learns and informs. That is my allotted role.'

Also featuring...

The incredible Doomsday Cannon of Salamander V from David Pugh and Ian Pickstock; more awesome action in 'Obvious Tactics' from David Pugh; and storming illustrations from Wayne England, Karl Kopinski, and Logan Lubera and Craig Yeung!

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